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September 21, 1880.

Vol. VII.

Single Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 165.

BILLY BAGGAGE, THE RAILROAD BOY: OR, RUN TO EARTH.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "WILL SOMERS," "PHIL HARDY," "PICAYUNE PETE," "DETECTIVE DICK," "HANDSOME HARRY," ETC., ETC.



"IT'S NOW OR NEVER!" CRIED BILLY, SWINGING THE RED LIGHT TO AND FRO.

Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.

BILLY BAGGAGE, The Railroad Boy; OR, RUN TO EARTH.

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BOSS BOY," "PICAYUNE PETE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A HURT HERO.

THOUGHT this was me; but ain't right sure of it. Ain't right sure of nothin' now. Seems as if I was hung on wires, just like a skeleton, and might shake myself down into dry bones.

The youthful speaker essayed to shake himself, but desisted, with a groan of pain.

"Wonder how it feels when a feller draps out of a balloon—bout five miles high or thereabouts? There's one thing I'll bet, and that's this: there ain't never no use stoppin' so sudden; 'specially when the ground's in the way."

He looked indeed as if he had stopped too suddenly. His clothes were torn and badly soiled. Blood was oozing from a dozen ugly cuts on his face and limbs. His right hand hung limp and helpless. When he essayed to walk it was with a halting step, as if he had been lamed.

"S'pose I'm a pictur'," he muttered, holding to a fence, for support. "I just mought as well took a hand in a scrimmage. Hope there won't nobody skeer me with a looking-glass. Does anybody live 'bout here, anyhow?"

He shaded his eyes and looked across the valley. Several houses were visible, at a considerable distance. The smoke from others curled up into the thin air, from b'ys and the woods that screened them.

Not far off, in the other direction, came the sound of wheels. He looked back, but no carriage was yet in sight.

"S'pect it's a slipp off into some by-road," he grumbled angrily. "Just my luck."

It proved not so, however. Around a turn in the road came the carriage, drawn by a pair of fine gray horses. A colored coachman drove. The seat behind was occupied by a young lady.

Quick as was the glance which the boy took at this occupant of the carriage, he saw not only that she was very handsome and richly dressed, but that her expression was that of a gentle and kindly nature.

He left his support and stepped hastily out into the road. But the effort was too much for his strength. He reeled like a drunken man, and fell prostrate in the very track of the horses.

"Stop, Hugo! Stop!" she cried, in quick accents of alarm. "The poor boy; did you notice how he was covered with blood? He has been badly hurt."

Hugo's lip curled unpleasantly as he pulled up the horses.

"Got his face scratched. Dat am my notion. Jist let him crawl out de way."

"No, no! he may die here in the road. Lift him into the carriage."

Hugo raised his hand in holy horror.

"An' cubber dem new seats wid blood an' dust, Miss Claire? Whatever will massa say?"

"It is no matter. The boy may die," was her imperious answer. "Do as I tell you, at once."

Hugo thus addressed, reluctantly complied. He lifted the youth from before the horses' feet, finding him to be helpless and apparently insensible. The coachman, to whom the curtains of his carriage were of far more importance than the safety of a vagrant boy, brushed the dust carefully from him before complying with the young lady's commands.

In a few minutes, however, he had resumed his seat, which was now partly occupied by the young lady, the lad being laid in a reclining position on the back seat of the carriage.

As they drove more slowly down the road she examined the features of the boy with great interest.

He might have been of any age from sixteen to eighteen, and had in his face a peculiarly frank, open expression which showed even through his swoon. His features were good, despite their present disfigurement; and his clothes, though poor in quality, were neat and well fitting. Altogether she was pleased with his appearance.

They had not ridden far before his eyes opened, and looked back with interest into hers. His was a gray, rather keen eye, round which a lurking sense of fun always rested.

"Whereabouts have I drapped now?" he asked, surveying the carriage.

"We found you in the road, just by the railroad track, badly hurt," she replied, in her musical and kindly tones. "How came you to be so injured?"

"Tumbled outter the moon, I guess," he answered, with a grimace. "Was just making forty miles an hour when I touched bottom. It's enough to put a boy's nose out of joint." He felt that useful member as if anxious to ascertain its condition.

"I presume that answer means that I am asking what is none of my business?" was her slightly hurt rejoinder.

"Not much," he responded, rising to a sitting posture. "Dunno who's got a better right to know."

"Why do you mock me then in your answer?" she replied, spiritlessly.

The boy laughed merrily.

"Was just telling myself that I must have tumbled out of a balloon," he said. "Thought I'd be perlite with you and say it was the moon."

She made no reply, and looked away with an expression that troubled him a little. Just then Hugo drew up at the gate of a mansion of some pretensions, which stood back from the road.

"Drive in, Hugo; and then you must go for the doctor at once," she said, anxiously.

In a few minutes more the wounded lad was helped in and laid on a couch, several anxious faces surrounding.

Hugo, despite his former grumbling, was not long in bringing the doctor. The latter saw with surprise the injured appearance of his patient, and asked a number of questions, getting about as much satisfaction as the lady had got before him.

Yet the boy, despite his odd answers, was not rude or impolite in manner. The doctor laughed as he proceeded to dress his injuries, leaving him much more comfortable and presentable than he had found him.

"Now, if it's all one to you folks, I guess a snooze might pay," he said, looking round with an eye that twinkled with fun. "When a feller's been wide awake as long as I have, he begins to git sleepy."

"How long have you been wide awake?" asked the doctor.

"All my life," replied the lad, with an imitable grimace, that set them all off laughing. Without further attention to them he closed his eyes, and seemed, in a moment, to be lost in a deep slumber.

"I fancy you have a character here, Miss Claire," the doctor remarked to the young lady.

"He is certainly an oddity," she replied. "I only hope that will prove his worst fault. I have, somehow, taken a fancy to him."

There was no sham about his sleep. It lasted until the next morning, when he woke refreshed by his slumbers, but weak and lame, while his right hand was helpless.

"Don't you think he is very pretty, aunt Claire?" spoke a childish voice by his bedside, ere he had opened his eyes.

"Yes, Lucy; handsome, and innocent-looking, and perverse; I don't know what to make of him," came in Miss Claire's tones.

"See here," said the boy, suddenly opening his eyes and looking into their faces. "I yawned last night. 'Cause that black-bird of yours made me feel contrary, I s'pose. And I've been ashamed of myself ever since."

"Asleep, were you not, ever since?" asked the child, looking quizzically into his eyes.

The boy gazed at the speaker, a pretty little girl of some seven years of age.

"I tumbled out of the lightnin' train," he remarked. "That's the whole long and short of it."

"How?" she exclaimed, in astonishment. "Do you mean that you fell from the cars?"

"The lightnin'-express. Forty miles an hour. Straight through from Pittsburg. Was sailin' along like greased thunder, when the ground jumped up and hit me, and the train slid on.—That's how it come."

"What does he mean, aunt Claire?" asked Lucy.

"I can hardly believe it," she replied, with much excitement of manner. "To fall from the express-train and not be killed. It does not seem credible."

"Goodness gracious!" cried the boy, energetically. "I was chawed up alive. That oughter been enough."

"But the train should have returned for you."

"I oughter hung on, you'd better say. The through lightnin' don't stop fur nothin'. If Colonel Tom Scott himself was to tumble off he'd have to wait for the next train. That's the way we railroad folks puts through business."

"Are you a railroad folk?" asked Lucy.

"You bet I am."

"In what position?" queried Miss Claire.

"I sell peanuts and gum-drops, and such delicacies of the season. And I bet there'll be high old times when I turn up missing. The officers of the road can't be spared."

The boy had risen, and was now reclining comfortably in an arm-chair.

"Had we not better send word to the station?" asked Miss Claire.

"Just what I was going to purpose," he replied, energetically. "Telegraph them that I'm all right, and will be on duty ag'in before the sun bids us two more good-nights."

"I never knew the sun to bid anybody good-night," declared Lucy, laughing.

"That's 'cause you're not old enough. Just you watch him, next setting," and the boy nodded his head in a wise manner that quite mystified little Lucy.

"What name shall I tell them?" asked Miss Claire, smiling at his oddity.

"Billy Baggage, the railroad men call me. But you telegraph William Baggage. And be sure you spell it right, or they mightn't reckernise me."

"How shall I spell it?" she asked, repressing a strong inclination to laugh.

"This is how I allers make my autygraph," he replied. "W-i-l, Wil; l-u-m, lum; William. B-a-g, Bag; g-u-g, gug; Baggage. That's William Baggage, and no other spellin' won't faze it."

"Shall I send up your breakfast?" asked Miss Claire, turning away to hide her face.

"Well, some'ight light, then. Half an oyster; or a pigeon's toe; or sich."

She left the room laughing.

"You're queer," said Lucy, nestling up to him. "But I like you.—And, do you know, that ain't good spelling? I didn't like to say so before aunt Claire."

"You mought have hurt my feelings. That's a fact, averred her auditor, with a quizzical look.

"Do you like taffy?" was Lucy's next question rather doubtfully made.

"If I don't it's queer!" he answered, enthusiastically; and their friendship was at once cemented by the close bonds of molasses taffy.

Two or three days passed, during which Billy was gradually recovering from the effects of his fall, which proved not nearly so serious as might naturally have been looked for.

During this time he had very little to say about his accident, throwing a degree of mystery around it by his quiet avoidance of all questions. Even the energetic and direct queries of Mr. Hamilton, Claire's father, gained him no more information than had been volunteered to the daughter.

"He is a queer dick; and there's something behind all this," said Mr. Hamilton, aside.

"You kin have the fun then of guessing what it is," thought Billy, who had overheard this remark.

It was evident that if they needed any information they would have to gain it by guessing, for Billy was close-mouthed as an oyster. Vulnerable enough, it is true, but letting out next to nothing in the way of business.

Two or three days passed, and he rapidly regained his strength, though he was lame yet in hand and foot, while his face looked like the map of a battlefield done in court-plaster.

One afternoon, just on the shadowy verge of evening, the boy limped into the rear parlor, thinking it deserted.

He was mistaken. Claire Hamilton was there, and with her a young gentleman whom Billy had not seen there before. There was a suspicious separation to opposite ends of the sofa when the boy entered, which should have admonished him to take his departure again forthwith.

Billy was not that kind of a boy. He was one that never retreated. Through the room he walked, his eyes fixed with a keen and curious glance on the face of the young man. He seated himself in a rocking-chair, facing them.

"A sorter nice kind of an evening," he remarked, in an off-handed way.

"Yes," replied Claire, absently.

"Dunno, though. It's streaky to the west. Mought kick up a rain yet. S'pose you're no judge of the weather?"

"No," answered the gentleman, with a savage intonation.

"Yes, and no. A few words go a long ways," remarked Billy, rocking himself nonchalantly in the chair, and quietly surveying the couple before him.

It was evident that the gentleman was growing angry. Claire sprung up with a nervous movement, saying:

"Excuse me a moment."

She hastily left the room.

Billy looked after her until she disappeared, then turned and faced her gentleman friend.

This person was a well-built individual, of middle height, broad-shouldered, and full-chested. His face was one which most people would have called handsome. Its principal features were the stern black eyes with which he returned the boy's cool stare, rather thin lips, and a firm chin. His lip was graced by a full black mustache.

"Do you think you will know me again?" he sarcastically asked Billy.

"Hope so," replied the latter, easily. "That's what I want to do."

"Well, you are cool about it."

"Always am, this kind of weather. See here. What do you think took Miss Claire out?"

"Her fancy, I suppose."

"I'll bet high it's a game to git rid of me," said the unabashed Billy. "It's the old sayin', you know, two's company and three's none. S'pose I don't know I ain't wanted?"

"You don't act as if you knew much of anything."

"Now don't you buy me fur a know-nothin', if you want to make a bargain," replied Billy, laughing. "I'd have sold straight off, only I jist want to see how she's goin' to work it. That's all."

He was interrupted by the return of the young lady, who seated herself quietly on the sofa.

"I think my father wishes to see you," she remarked to Billy.

"Bad?" asked Billy. "Is he sufferin' for my presence?"

"He wishes to speak to you."

"Oh, it ain't altogether fur the good of his eyesight then," and the mischievous boy rocked lazily in his chair. "I don't know that there's any use mindin' me. I kin beat thunder at shettin' my eyes. Howsomever, as the young gentleman seems sort of nervous 'bout havin' me here, I guess I'll git."

The "young gentleman" seemed very much inclined to hasten Billy's pace. He half-rose from his seat, but was restrained by a merry laugh from Claire, who seemed to see Billy's behavior from its ludicrous side.

But she had not quite got rid of the boy's attentions yet for that day.

It was two hours or more later when he again met her, in the hall.

"That chap sweet on you, Miss Claire?" he asked.

"I don't think that a proper question, Master Billy," answered Claire, laughingly.

"I've seen him afore, that's all. And he mought have been in better company. He ain't all O. K., Miss Claire. Don't keer to hurt your feelin's, but a feller's got to stick to the truth, you know."

And Bill looked virtuously indignant, while his hearer seemed not entirely comfortable.

CHAPTER II.

A RAILROAD KING.

"Now just you let up; if you want to keep out the hospital. There's a bit of advice for you."

"If he don't look like a hospital rat himself, then

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it's queer," and the boy speaker laughed provokingly.

"I can smash you into mincemeat yet, anyhow. An' if you've got much more blowin' to do, s'pose you just go over to them lawyer chaps and git your will made."

And the speaker pointed with his left hand to a row of buildings, plentifully adorned in front with signs of the legal fraternity. His right hand was in no condition to use, being in an impromptu sling, while his face was scarred and patched in twenty places. It was no other than Billy Baggage.

"I'll bet three cents he's been having a mill with a cat," said one of the provoking boys.

"Or been digging gravel with his nose, and got his face scratched," suggested another.

"Or playing tanner, and hunting rats in a coal-bin," remarked a third.

"It's jolly fun, ain't it?" asked Billy, sarcastically. "High old times you're havin'! S'pose you think a one-handed chap ain't no 'count'?"

"He can't do much crowing," decided a red-haired boy.

"He mought do somethin' like this, then."

And in an instant the mocking boy had his hat knocked down over his eyes, and his feet tripped from under him, falling with a thud on the hard ground.

"There's one; where's the other?" asked Billy, squaring himself with his sound arm.

The three other boys advanced, but seemed a little disinclined to attack the resolute-looking foe.

So Billy carried the war into Africa by giving one of them a sharp clip on the nose that drew blood from that prominent feature. A third got a cuff on the ear that sent him staggering against a tree.

"Come on! File in! Tumble up!" cried Billy, savagely. "I've only got one arm, and a lame leg, and my face scratched like pisen. Now's your chance for glory," and he emphasized his challenge by a kick on the fourth boy's shin that set that young person dancing with pain.

"It's only fun, you know," exclaimed Billy. "Jist a bit of sport."

But they did not quite agree with him as they drew discreetly back, and seemed holding a council of war.

Billy looked belligerent enough as he stood in fighting attitude, foot and hand advanced, and his keen eyes fixed on his antagonists.

But four sound boys to one cripple was too great odds, successful as he had been in his first onslaught, and Billy gave an anxious glance around, as the boys advanced in mass on him.

In a minute more he was in the heart of the battle; striking, kicking, and receiving two blows to his one. But not a step did he retreat, and not for a moment did he cease to chaff his foes.

"Come on, bully boys! Four to one ain't no sort of odds for Mudtowners. Let her rip! and see who's got the backbone."

He was now catching it, fast and furious. It was evident that, quick and alert as he was, he could not hold his own many seconds more. At this juncture unexpected aid arrived.

"There's your rations!" cried Billy, giving the bleeding-nosed boy another reminder upon that organ.

At the same moment a stronger hand took part in the fray, and the attacking party drew hastily back from the assault of powerful reinforcements.

"Cowardly young hounds!" came in scornful tones from a manly voice. "Four to one, and he a cripple! Make off with you, or I will scour you as you deserve."

They seemed to think he meant it, too, as they hastily retired from the field of battle, waiting until at a safe distance to hurl some opprobrious epithets at this new opponent.

Billy looked up curiously at the stalwart man who had delivered him from his peril. He gave a start as he saw the face of his new ally.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" he exclaimed. "If it ain't Miss Claire's sweetheart, you kin take my head fur a meat-block."

"And this is my young friend that fell from the moon, eh?"

"See here, neighbor; there's somethin' clever 'bout you. What mought your name be?" asked Billy.

"George Howard," was the answer.

"All square. Jist wanted to know."

"That's one point where I have a crow to pick with you, Billy," said Mr. Howard. "You want to know too much. Just take my advice; the next time you see a young gentleman and lady sitting very close together in a room, take it for a hint that you've got pressing business in another part of the house."

"But s'pose a feller don't feel that way?" asked Billy.

"It sometimes saves a fellow the inconvenience of being kicked out," retorted Mr. Howard.

"All right," was Billy's laughing rejoinder. " Didn't know but I might git sweet on somebody some time; and wanted to learn the ropes. That was all. Much oblieged to you fur drivin' off them hornets."

"An' you had best be getting away from their nest," replied Mr. Howard, as he walked away. "They may return."

"I wouldn't keer a cent fur a tea-pot full of them, if I only had two arms," returned Billy, with a rueful glance at his lame hand. "Guess I'll make tracks. Tain't no use waitin' when there's a hamerin' at the end of it."

And Billy walked off in a direction at right angles to that taken by Mr. Howard. His pace, however, was very deliberate, and he seemed lost in deep reflection.

He looked, again and again, after Mr. Howard.

"S'pose I oughter foller that man," he soliloquized. "I'm an off'cer on the Pennsy; that's one thing. Then there's that sweet Miss Claire, that he's makin' up to; that's another thing. Every feller that's half a feller oughter fight fur his ship and his gal, and I know there's somethin' duberous 'bout Mr. George Howard."

As he spoke he had gradually changed his course till he was on the direct track of the person named.

The latter left Independence Square, where these incidents had occurred, by the gate at Sixth and Walnut streets. Billy was now but a short distance behind him.

For half a square this pursuit continued, then the boy suddenly came to a dead stop.

"Tain't correck. Tain't square," he said to himself. "He just stood by me like a man. Made them mud wasps git up and git. And here's me follerin' of him. Tain't honor, Billy Baggage; and when a feller like you goes back on honor he ain't got nothin' left. I'll swar I won't foller him another step if he's got a plot to knock the Pennsy Railroad into the middle of next week."

And Billy looked virtuously honorable as he stood there with compressed lips, his eyes longingly following the man whom honor forbade his feet from purseling.

A minute more of thought, and a new resolution seemed to come unto him.

"Yes, I will," he remarked, with decision. "I'll step up to the office and see the kurnel. Ain't no use in a feller bein' too modest and hidin' his taller-candle under a bushel measure, 'corlin' to Scriptur."

Billy walked rapidly on, like one who had formed a fixed resolve. In doing so he unexpectedly found himself in sight again of George Howard, who had stopped and was earnestly conversing with a person he had met.

Billy turned his head away, anxious in his honorable intentions, not to see any of Mr. Howard's associates.

But he had involuntarily observed the figure and dress of the man, together with a certain rakishness of manner, and a set of his silk hat well over toward his left ear.

"Bet that's a night-hawk," said Billy, critically, as he passed on.

On Fourth street, some distance south of Walnut, stands a great granite building, into whose doors ebbs and flows a constant rivulet of humanity. It is hardly decided enough to be called a human tide.

The edifice contains the main offices of the Pennsylvania Railroad Co., whose name is cut in enduring letters above its granite portal.

Up the broad steps and through the door walked Billy Baggage, his head up, and an assured look upon his honest and frank features.

"Whereabouts does the kurnel hang out his shingle?" he asked of a person who stood in the broad hall.

"What kurnel?" queried this person.

"Why, Kurnel Tom Scott! Guess he's the only boss of the regiment 'bout here."

"Oh!" said the man, laughing. "You will find his office up-stairs. In the second story."

"Much oblieged," replied Billy, walking resolutely up-stairs.

There was a moment's hesitation, such as any one might feel on approaching the throne-room of the Great Mogul. But the boy was not the one to turn back after having set his hand to the plow. He plunged forward, almost coming into collision with a black-whiskered guard of the door.

Billy drew back a pace, and looked defiantly at the resolute sentry.

"Ain't no use gittin' sour 'bout it," he said. "Jist tell the kurnel I want to see him."

"What name?" asked the supercilious sentry.

"Tain't no matter. Tell him it's an officer of the road."

"What officer?"

"General distributor."

"Distributor of what?"

"Oh! peanuts and bananas.—Guess you'll want to look at my naturalization papers next."

"Well, you can't come in," answered the door keeper, sourly. "Colonel Scott is engaged."

"Jist tell him I'm here, will you, Johnny? And don't be swellin' yourself," retorted the boy, with supreme impudence. "I've heered of frorts-a-bu'stin' afore they got to be elephants. So, look out."

"Way, you saucy little hound!" exclaimed the man, angrily. "Make yourself scarce, now, if you don't want to be kicked down-stairs."

"Never was kicked by a jackass," replied Billy, defiantly. "Don't b'lieve it'd agree with my constertution. Come, now, slowy: tell the kurnel I'm a-waitin'."

With a muttered imprecation, the angry sentinel started for the boy, who stood his ground, boldly. The battle likely to ensue was nipp'd in the bud by an imperious voice that came from the office, within.

"What is the matter, John? Who is there?"

The belligerent suddenly drew back, and answered in a deprecating tone:

"It's a beggarly young cripple, sir. An impudent little varlet who insis' upon coming into your office."

"A cripple?" asked the voice.

"Yes, but not a beggar," replied Billy, indignantly. "I'm an off'cer of the Pennsy, and there ain't none of them but what git his rations reg'lar."

"Come in, sir," spoke the voice, decisively.

With a highly aggravating wink to his discomfited antagonist, Billy strutted into the room, not deigning him a second look.

The apartment in which the lad now found himself, was an elegantly appointed office, richly and tastefully furnished.

But Billy had eyes only for the gentleman who sat at an office-desk, in the center of the room.

He was a person of good figure, rather stout, and of middle height, with a fresh, and somewhat florid complexion. An abundance of iron-gray hair, loosely tossed, adorned his head; and grayish side-whiskers bounded his handsome face.

His eyes were keen and alert, and looked up at his visitor with an expression that meant business. A look of surprise marked his features as he saw Billy's scarred face.

"What is the matter with you, boy?" he asked. "I have not heard of a battle, lately."

"It was only a scrimmage, sir," answered Billy.

"Oh! A scrimmage, eh?"

"Yes, 'tween my face and a gravel-bed. I just stepped off the lightnin' train, that was all—or got kicked off."

"The deuce you did!" exclaimed his questioner.

"Thought I'd vamoosed the ranch," continues Billy. "But 'tain't so easy to knock the prim-outer an oak log. Think there's some oak juice in my veins."

Colonel Scott, for it was he, looked at the boy if he thought he had discovered a character. Billy's modesty was not likely to strike in. He stood in an easy attitude, looking the great railroad magnate in the eyes.

"What train?" asked the latter, shortly.

"Number four. Through express."

"And what was your business on the road?"

"Oh! varieties. Newspapers and provisions. I do the fancy work."

The colonel looked at him with increasing interest.

"Are you the boy they call Billy Baggage?"

"William Baggage," was the dignified reply. "W-i-l-l-u-m, William. B-a-g-g-u-e, Baggage. That's the correck spellin'."

Colonel Scott looked amused.

"I have heard of you," he said, quickly. "I heard you were missing from the train, and received a telegram about you from up the road. Sit down. You look weak. Now tell me all about it. Kicked off, you say?" His voice had a very kindly ring.

"Yes, kurnel" said Billy, confidently, as he seated himself. "I've been talked half to death 'bout it. But I wouldn't spill out till I come to head-quarters."

"Ha! there is some mystery, then?"

"I happened into the baggage-car, you see," replied Billy, impressively. "Found the agent out, and a hard-faced cuss makin' hisself at home. He was just flingin' a bit of a trunk out the side door when I froze onto his coat-tails, and hollered like thunder."

"You look as if you might make a good watchdog," remarked the colonel.

"The feller drapp'd on me like an elephant on a roode-dog," continued Billy. "He was one of them chaps that's got cast-iron arms and brass muscles, and I wasn't any more 'count in his grip than a slice of cheese in a monkey's claws. He jist h'isted me outer the car door as if I was a bag of dried apples, and helped me with the toe of his number twenty cowhides. You should jist have seen me plowin' gravel! All I've got to say is that the Pennsy's lucky there's anything left of me but a hole in the ground and a greas-spot."

The colonel leaned back in his chair, looking abstractedly at Billy.

"How soon will you be ready for duty?"

"Soon as I'm called on," replied Billy. "But I hope the Pennsy will be able to fit along a week or so without me, till I kin shake my bones into their places."

"Very well," said Colonel Scott, with a wave of dismissal. "Report here when ready."

"O. K.," returned Billy, bowing himself out, with a gratified loo... on his young face.

CHAPTER III.

HANS, THE GUM-DROP BOY.

BILLY BAGGAGE was a Philadelphian. He had a father and mother, as all good Philadelphians have. And the Baggages lived in a house of their own, which is another of the perquisites of virtuous Philadelphians.

This "Baggage car," as we may call it, was one of a train of similar cars on an uptown street. It was a modest, two-story mansion, built upon the smallest piece of ground that such an edifice could well be squeezed upon.

The facade was not ornamental, except where an occasional old hat varied the monotony of unbroken panes, or the paint had been frescoed by numberless touches of unwashed fingers.

Inside the element of picturesqueness continued to reign. Chairs which seemed to have been picked up from twenty lumber-rooms; no two of the same pattern nor broken in the same way. Limping tables and scalloped crockery. Carpetless floors, and a stove held up at one corner by a brick. Such were a few of the more prominent features of this domicile.

For it must be confessed that the elder Baggage was a piece of bad baggage. He was too fond of his wife to care much for the amenities of domestic intercourse. If the lady of the house had a sour temper, she had plentiful excuse for it, and, poor thing, she had a sweet heart at bottom.

Billy loved his mother, despite the frequent sharp words he received, and it was the hope of his heart to be one day able to relieve her from the sharp struggle with poverty and discomfort which had become almost second nature with her.

For all that he much preferred the days he spent on the road to the hours which he wore out at home.

"Looke here, you Bill!" hiccupped his father, trying hard to balance himself on a three-legged

Billy Baggage the Railroad Boy.

chair. "Like to know when you 'spect to git to work ag'in? This thing's played out. Dashed if 'tain't. 'S is a gen'leman of eddication an' a scholar ain't got nothing to do but keep idle vagabones like you. Don't see it."

"Oh! shut up, Jacob, and let the boy alone," exclaimed the mother, from amid her pots and pans. "Just look at his face."

"Like to know what bizness he's got with such a face," replied the tipsy father. "Never heered of his jail tumolin' off a train. Oh, no! he's too stiddy-headed for that. Dunno what the boys is made of nowadays."

"They ain't made of chalk and cheese, anyhow," protested Billy, "else I'd be ground into powder and mashed into pancakes. Just like to see you try it on yo'self, dad. Bet there wouldn't be nothin' left of you b'it a small of bid whisky."

"Now just hear to him, mammy," whimpered the inebrates. "That's his respect for his old daddy. Me that's tol' all slaved, night and morning, to keep a 'spectable family—"

"What family?" sharply interrupted the wife. "That of Joe Dangles, the whisky-seller, down at the corner?"

"Oh, woman!" began the drunken father. "Oh, woman, in the hours of ease—"

His quotation met with an unfortunate interruption. The chair on which he had been sawing to and fro for the last five minutes suddenly gave way beneath him, and chair and sitter came with a crash to the floor.

Billy ran to lift him up, but was met by a sharp rep' from his mother.

"Let the drunken brute alone, Billy. He's as often on the floor as on the chair, and better there, I guess. He won't break anything."

"Yes, he will," replied Billy, essaying to lift him.

"What will he break, I'd like to know?"

"My self-respect," said Billy, gravely.

The mother looked at her son in astonishment. This was a new revelation to her. The boy was not usually troubled with conscientious scruples.

"Leave me 'longs," grumbled the father. "Don't 'sturb the poor old broken-he'rted dad. A thankless chill's better nor a serpent's tooth, as the good book says; an' well I know it."

Billy let go his log-like parent in disgust. His eyes were full of mingled pity and horror, as he looked down upon him.

"Let him alone," cried the sorely tried mother. "He's just like a pig. He's at home rolling in the dirt."

"If ever I let any of that rattlesnake pizen pass my lips, I only hope I'll choke on it," said the dis-gusted son. "Don't you keer, mammy. I'll look out for you. An' Billy Baggage ain't never goin' to set his brains afire with dis-gised strychnine."

"Come, boys, let's troll
The flowing bowl."

sung the hiccupping father.

With a quick jerk of the door behind him, that rattled the crazy mansion to its foundations, Billy left the house, his face full of mingled emotions.

He strode down the street with a step that was hastened by the exhaust steam of angry thoughts. His lamecaes had nearly disappeared, and his arm was out of the sling. His face, too, was rapidly throwing off its top-dressing of court-plaster. Billy would soon be himself again.

"Hey! little chap," cried a voice at his elbow. "Dat's a great pig hurry you're in this morning now."

Billy quickly turned, to see a youth of about his own age, whose broad Dutch face was beaming with good-humor.

"Hello! Hans," he exclaimed, throwing off his depression instantly. "Is it yerself now, sure as shootin' too?"

"Yav. Mi dinks so," replied Hans with great gravity.

"And what brings you here?"

"Mine feet," returned Hans.

"What, th'm canal boats?" returned Billy, looking down questioningly at his friend's huge supports. "Looks to me as if you'd brung them, stead of them bringin' you. Au' no fool of a job neftaer."

"Yav; dey is goot to stand on, and to walk on," replied the imperturbable Dutch boy. "Big footses is bet'r'n goot. Any foot knows dat."

"An' I ain't no fool, that's the reason I don't know it," said Billy, laughing. "What you doin' off the road, Hans?"

"Comel off at elevin'. Don't go on till seveng. Dat's how," returned Hans. "An' gum-drops is riz, dat's more. Specilley de silver-plated, double-barrel kint."

"Way don't you rig them up yourselves? That's the way I used to do," replied Billy.

"So we's goin'," Hans answered, with a mysterious wink. "D'r's ferri goot, too. Cal's foot jelly, and shoemak'r's wax. Nix, Billy. Don't say nuffin'. Dey stic'es nice to the teef; dat's all. An' a nice pictur' on de box."

Billy laughed merrily at Hans's new idea in the manufacture of gum-drops.

"Put in plenty of sweetnin' and make them stick good, Hans; and they're sure to take. Hello! What's that?"

Hans followed the direction of his friend's eyes, but saw nothing except a group of three men talking, a short distance before them.

"Don't see nix fire, nor nusslin'," said Hans. "What for you pinch my arm?"

"The men there. Look at them close, Hans," replied Billy, in a cautious tone. "I'll bet a cow they're down on Pennsy. Seen that feller afore with the clipper-built hat, and that wears his duds with more style than a tailor's dummy. There they

go. Foller them close, boy. Hole them, and fetch me back word where they go."

"Yaw. Dat's goot. But what for?" asked Hans.

"I'll tell you afterwards. Don't hang fire now, if you keer a brass farthin' fer old Pennsy," urged Billy, pushing Hans off.

The Dutch boy moved away with a lumbering step, his big eyes fixed on the three men who were slowly walking on in front, lost in earnest conversation.

"It's the chap that was talkin' to Howard, or else I'm a soid coon!" said Billy earnestly to himself.

He stood looking after Hans, his feet uneasily shifting as if with anxiety to follow his agent.

"Wish he hadn't mix'd in that little scrimmage in the Square," muttered Billy, disconcerted. "Like first rate to track them, but a fell'er's got to be hon'able. A Pennsy boy 'bout honor 'd be like a pig thout an ear. Thunder'n' lucky, though, that Hans Brictman was on hand."

And with this queer idea of honor, that kept him from pursuing the suspected parties but freely allowed him to put another scout on the scent, Billy impatiently waited the return of Hans.

He had not as long to wait as he expected, either, for the broad-built Dutch boy soon came lumbering back.

"Quick work, Hans, my boy," cried Billy, eagerly, catching him by the coat. "What luck? Hole the foxes, eh?"

"Yaw," answered Hans, sturdily.

"Where was it? Have you the house? Number and street?"

"Nix houses," returned Hans.

"Nix? What the thunder then?"

"Lager," replied Hans, bringing his hands up with a sign of drinking. "Yonder. De corner, at Heinrich Ottshlanger's."

"The devil!" exclaimed Billy, in deep disgust.

"Well, if you ain't a high old scout. Holed them in a lager beer saloon. Jist as good as mailing a rat-hole in a board-yard."

"Yaw," repeated Hans. "Two lager, ein Weiss.

Goot, now I tells you."

"Well, if I wouldn't like to sell you for a curiosity," snarled Billy, looking discontentedly at his friend. "I'd a' bet high nobody couldn't be so dumb. And I'd lost if anybody'd bring you up."

And he walked away, leaving Hans gazing after him in dazed astonishment.

"Seen their faces and rigs, anyhow," continued Billy, to himself. "It mayn't be quite honor, but a fell'er can't help seein' what he sees. And I'm square with you now, George Howard. So look out for your eye if I run across you ag'in."

It was two days after the date of this occurrence that Billy appeared again in the office of Colonel Scott.

"Ready to report on duty, kurnel," he announced, with his usual modesty. "Sound, hand and foot, and rubbed my face down with emery."

The colonel looked him over a minute without speaking, noting with pleased eyes the handsome face and intelligent look of the boy, and the erect attitude of his sinewy young frame.

He then turned and wrote for a few minutes, handing Billy a sealed note.

"I have inquired about you," he said. "You are a good boy, and are promoted. Take this to Mr. Reynolds at the West Philadelphia depot."

"Thank you, kurnel," said Billy, with a grateful look. "I won't go back on you; you kin bet high on that."

CHAPTER IV. LIFE OR DEATH.

"For the first snow of the season this means work," exclaimed a brakeman, coming hastily into the baggage-car, and stamping till his feathery coating flew from him in white clouds.

"Snowing—eh?" questioned the baggage-master, looking up from the account book over which he was poring.

A peal of youthful laughter rung through the car.

"Why, an earthquake mought slide under Harry Bodkin's feet when he had his eyes glued into one of them, figurin' books, and he not an ounce the wiser."

It was the merry voice of Billy Baggage. This young gentleman was coiled up on a trunk near the door of the car, looking out into the fleecy atmosphere.

They were running at the rate of forty miles an hour, eastward from Harrisburg, through a driving snow storm that shot in long white lines past the swift train, and blotted out every object from sight at a few rods distance from the cars.

"Where are we?" said Harry Bodkin.

"Near Lancaster. So far as a fellow can see in this confounded storm," replied the brakeman, going out again to the car platform.

"Shouldn't wonder if it'd make sleighing," yawned Billy, lazily.

"Hang the sleighing. If it don't make trouble for the cars I'll be satisfied," rejoined Harry.

Billy sat looking wisely at the baggage-master, as the latter dived again into the pages of his book, and became oblivious to all things else.

"Seen that feller, George Howard, at the West Philly dep't, yester day," muttered Billy, in a half soliloquy. "Talkin' to one of them queer 'coons that he's so thick with."

"Just you take my advice and don't bother your self about George Howard," remarked Harry, looking up with an odd smile. "Young chaps like you often get along best by tending to their own business."

"That's all mighty nice," cried Billy, indignantly. "But I ain't forgot how Kurnel Tom Scott give me a lift into this here baggage-car, and I'm not going

back on the kurnel. You won't say there ain't been trouble on the road lauely?"

"There have been some desperate efforts to wreck trains," admitted Harry.

"That's what I mean; and that's trouble," persisted Billy. "Now just sure as shootin' Howard's gang has got a hand in this business. I'm workin' for the Pennsy overland and underhand, and if I kin smell out the rats that's playin' these tricks I'm just the boy that's goin' fur them."

Harry Bodkin looked up, with an amused expression, at his indignant young friend.

"I've heard frogs bark before," he said. "It is wonderful how wise we boys are—and what fools we make of ourselves when we think we're specially smart."

"I ain't one of them kind," replied Billy, sententiously.

"Just you keep clear of this fellow Howard, if you don't want to be sold cheap," remarked Harry, with a satirical laugh, losing himself immediately again in the pages of his book.

Billy got up and walked about the floor of the car, not quite satisfied in his mind with the turn the conversation had taken, yet not deeming it advisable to interrupt him again.

At this moment there sounded the shrill whistle of the locomotive.

"There's Lancaster," exclaimed Billy, opening the door of the car, and stepping out to where the brakeman was holding his solitary vigil.

The train careened and plunged onward still, through the snow that filled the air like a descending cloud. The brakes had been applied, and the cars were rapidly coming to a halt. The sheds and buildings of a considerable city showed dimly through the white mist. In five minutes more they came to rest before the long, plain depot building at Lancaster.

Billy leaped from the train, and took a boy's header up through the snow. Quite a number of passengers left the cars, and stamped their way into the station, half-blinded by their sudden plunge into the chilling, fleecy atmosphere.

Hurrying back, Billy nearly ran into two gentlemen who were about getting aboard the train. An impression at the boy's awkwardness broke from the lips of one of them. Billy drew back, taking them in at a glance, where the long gleam from the depot light fell dimly upon them.

The boy started as his quick eyes recognized the smartly-dressed man whom he had seen talking with George Howard; and in the short, squat man with him, one of the three whom Hans Brictman had tracked to the lager-beer saloon.

He followed them quietly into the car. It was empty, with the exception of a half-dozen persons gathered near the further end. The two new passengers took a seat out of hearing of the conversation proceeding between these persons.

Billy took a seat just behind them, coiling himself up so as to be invisible over the high-backed seats. His movement had been masked by the rattle of the car-wheels, which were again in full play.

But few words passed until after the conductor had taken up their fares. He looked down on Billy inquiringly, but was greeted with a wink by that young gentleman, and passed on smilingly.

The smartly-dressed passenger now rose and walked forward to the water-cooler at the front end of the car. He looked keenly around him as he returned. Billy was quite lost to sight, swallowed up into the deep seat in which he had coiled his small proportions.

"Guess we can talk safely," said the man, in a cautious tone, as he reseated himself. "You might have let the cat out, Jack, there at the dep't."

"A miss is as good as a mile," growled Jack, in a hoarse tone. "And if you thought I was going to let any cat loose you reckon poon the wrong terrier."

"I hoped you were too smart."

"I don't make no brags on smartness," returned Jack. "It's claps like you, Joe Blizzard, that's smart. I'm only wide-awake."

"I don't think neither of you would set a river afire very soon," thought their lurking eavesdropper.

Their conversation continued for some time in a lower tone. But Billy had sharp ears, and not a word escaped him. And certain facts of extreme interest came to his alert senses. His head was raised above the level of the seat, in acute eagerness to follow this highly interesting conference.

It continued for half an hour nearly.

"Where is that spot, Joe? I don't quite know the lay of the land thereway."

"It is at the turnpike crossing, about four miles the other side of Whitehall," replied Joe.

"And it will be dark as blazes."

"Certainly. It is half dark now, with the snow. At six o'clock it will be pitch dark. I am half sorry for Bill Bounce, the engineer, but if folks won't be warned there must be some sharp examples."

"You're a blasted nice bunch of sentimentality," growled Jack, with an oath. "And as for the snow, I don't see it."

Billy glanced out of the car window. It had indeed stopped snowing. The sun, not far from its setting, had broken through a rift in the clouds, and was throwing long, level lines of light across the pure white mantle that enveloped the earth as far as the eye could reach.

The two men ceased talking, and settled themselves into easier postures. Eily took the opportunity to glide from his seat and step unobserved to the car door.

He opened it quietly and passed out to the platform. The boy was deeply excited; his face was flushed, and his hands clenched with a deep indignation.

"Well, if it ain't a devilish business, then I don't

now beans. And if I don't circumvent them there'll be thunder to pay. I'd blow on the job, but what would be the use? These railroad men know too much to take any instructions from a boy. Didn't I just git laughe at by Harry Bodkin fur only hintin' that a rascal wasn't an honest man? If it's to be done, I've got to do it, that's flat. And if I don't do it, sell me fur a soft-shell clam."

He stood in deep cogitation for several minutes, thought after thought, plan after plan, passing through his young brain. Then, with a slight shiver in the cool air, he entered the next car and fixed himself in an empty seat, looking out eagerly as mile after mile and station after station were passed by the swift train.

Coatesville, Downingtown, Paoli, Reeserville, and other stations were shot past without a stop. They were rapidly approaching Whitehall. Billy got up, apportioned and concealed a brakeman's lantern under his coat, and waited with nervous impatience.

The whistle of the locomotive sounded long through the darkness.

"Whitehall at last," Billy said, with a deep breath. "The next station, and I must do it, if I git kicked out of the service for my puul. There ain't no big things without risks in them."

Five—ten minutes more. The boy rose and went out on the car platform, buttoning his coat tightly about him as he felt the keen nig' air. Again a whistle sounded from the engine in front.

"Now for it!" Billy set his lips tightly together. "If they ain't got the perleteness to stop themselves how's a feller goin' to git off thout ringing the car-bells?"

A moment more, and he had grasped the signal-ropes, and give the conductor's signal for the stopping of the train.

This magus of the road was seated, smokin' a quiet cigar with his friend Harry Bodkin in the baggage car, when the ropes rattled sharply over his head, and in an instant more the speed of the train began to diminish.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he cried, starting up suddenly and running back through the train. "Who pulled that rope?"

There was no answer. No one seemed to know. The train had come almost to a full stop when the fat coon conductor again signaled for it to proceed.

He did not notice a light figure running quickly across the snow to the shelter of a neighboring building.

"That's done," said Billy, drawing a long breath of relief as he saw the train again gathering headway in its onward progress. "Now for the turnpike crossing. Hello!"

This last exclamation was given in a tone full of surprise and dread.

The boy staggered as he looked about him, with eyes that seemed ready to start from their sockets.

"May I be chawed up alive by a donkey!" he ejaculated, rubbing his forehead vigorously. "It's Whitehall, or I never seen it, and I'm a good four miles out of the way."

The clear tinkle of sleigh-bells rang out upon the night-air, mingling with his words, and a smart cut-shot past him, drawing up in front of a house about twenty rods away.

Billy stood looking at it with dilated eyes, a bold purpose silvly forming itself in his brain. A young man sprung from the sleigh and stepped quickly up to the house.

"Four miles," soliloquized the boy. "Four miles, and only twenty minutes to do it in. It must be did! There's life or death in the air, and I'm not goin' to have a murder on my conscience if I have to bu'st something or kill a hoss."

Down the street he ran. The time for thought was past. Action was now demanded.

With a quick spring Billy was in the sleigh and had seized the reins. The next instant the impatient horse was off, at full speed down the road, jerking the light sleigh rapidly through the unbroken snow.

But the new driver had stolen more than he bargained for. He found that he had more than the sleigh on his hands, as a loud scream broke on the air behind him. Half-turning in his seat he made out the form of a woman in the seat behind him.

It was almost an impression that broke from the boy's lips as he grasped the whip and brought the lash shrewdly on the horse's back.

"Neck or nothing now," he muttered.

It was quite an impression that came from the young man, who had just discovered the theft of his sleigh, and had heard the calls for help of his lady friend.

"Oh, stop! Let me out!" she cried, in an agony of fear.

"Don't you be ske red, ma'am," said Billy, encouragingly, as he torched the horse again with the whip, making the wretched animal spring forward with renewed spirit. "I wouln't hurt a hair of your head for a barrel basket chock full of gold."

"Stop! oh stop!" she moaned.

"Ain't got time," answered Billy. "Every minute counts now. You and me has got to go through this job 'cept the harness gives, or the hoss jumps through his skin. It's life or death, ma'am."

The lad continued to moan, not much reassured by these evagmatical words.

But now, in the distance behind them, the thud of a horse's hoofs could be heard. They were pursued. A ray of light across the road showed the forms of two men, on horseback, on their track.

The young kidnapper only set his teeth more firmly, grasped the reins with the hand of a driver, and used the whip freely.

"I'm goin' to put her through if all Chester county turns out," he exclaimed, "or if the hoss drops in his tracks. Dead hoss is better than dead men."

"Who are you?" asked the woman behind him.

with more courage. "That is the voice of a mere boy."

Billy turned quickly, a light breaking over his countenance.

"Miss Claire, or I don't know peas from pumpkins!" he shouted. "And you ain't afear'd of me? Why, I'm only Billy Baggage, the boy you picked up on the railroad track, you know. The idear of me hurting you!"

Claire Hamilton, for it was she, gave a sigh of relief as she recognized the boy.

"But—" she began.

"Not a word. Do you hear that screech?"

"The engine whistles!"

"Yes. It's the through freight from Philly. There's devility afoot to-night, Miss Claire. If I don't git to the crossing afore that train, it'll just go to eternal smash. We've got to do it, or else you and me's murderers."

The light sleigh shot like a meteor over the surface of the snow. Not far behind came on the two horsemen, shouting fiercely for the runaway to stop. From the opposite direction the low roll of wheels was audible. And now the head-light of the engine glared out like a great eye across the white breast of the snow.

It was an exciting moment. Billy had drawn the lantern from his coat and flashed its light upon the track in front. The devilish scheme was apparent. A rail had been torn up and laid across the track. Just beyond stood several men, as if awaiting the terrible wrecking of the swiftly coming train.

"It's now or never!" cried the boy, bringing his horse up, by main strength, on the very verge of the rails.

In an instant more he had sprung upright upon the seat, and was swinging the red light of his lantern wildly to and fro through the still night air.

"God send they see it!" exclaimed Claire, whose heart was full to bursting with the excitement of the scene.

The horsemen were now nearly upon them. The devoted train came on with a thundering roar of wheels. There were no signs of slackening of speed, and it seemed too near now for any human appliances to save it from its doom.

And at that instant the whip of the foremost horseman, who had not comprehended Billy's action, struck the lantern from his hand, dashing it into the snow.

"My God, you've murdered them!" groaned the boy sinking down nervelessly into the sleigh.

And the red gleam of the engine light glared like the eye of doom into his white face.

CHAPTER V.

THE WRECKERS ON THE RUN

ALMOST simultaneously with the fall of the danger signal from Billy's hand, came the shrill whistle of the locomotive, sounding "Cawn Brakes."

The boy's devoted effort had not been in vain. The engineer had not failed to see the light; nor was the train so near, nor moving so rapidly, as he had imagined.

Under the vigorous pressure of the brakes its speed quickly lessened, and it soon came to a halt on the very verge of the torn-up rail. Two minutes' delay in giving the signal and its destruction would have been inevitable.

"Thank God!" broke in fervent accents from Claire's lips. "They are safe. And my brave boy—"

She turned to Billy, but he was no longer in the sleigh. How or when he had left it, she had no idea.

The horse was growing very restive. Claire stooped and caught the reins, but her hand was powerless to restrain the startled animal. A low cry of alarm broke from her lips.

Fortunately one of the horsemen perceived the danger. Dashing precipitately past the sleigh, in an instant he had the horse by the head, and was forcing him back with a strong hand.

"Do not be alarmed, Miss Hamilton," he exclaimed. "I can hold him. There is no danger."

"Thank you," said Claire, sinking back into the sleigh. "I was startled, I admit."

The engine was puffing and throbbing like a wild animal chafing against restraint. A dozen men hurried forward from all parts of the train.

"What is loose, here?" cried a hoarse voice, as the engineer sprung hastily to the ground, and came forward, lantern in hand. "Who gave that signal?"

"There's thunder to pay!" exclaimed a voice on the other side of the engine. "Here's a rail up and spiked across the track! Ten feet more, my boy, and there'd been prayers to be said for you."

The throng gathered hastily, with exclamations of alarm. The engineer came up to the sleigh with his lantern. He peered curiously inside.

"Which of you gave that signal?" he asked, in his hoarse voice.

"Neither of us," replied the horseman.

"I saw a man on horseback dash across the railroad. Was it he?"

"No. That was my companion. He's in pursuit of the wreckers, whom we saw yonder not three minutes ago."

"Thunder! It must have been one of you. The light did not swing without hands."

"It was a boy," said Claire, in her low, sweet voice. "A young lad, who ran away with me and my sleigh together, and frightened me badly, too."

"A boy?" questioned the engineer, incredulously. "How did he know of this business? Ran away with you, you say?"

"I know nothing more," she replied. "He seems to have known. He was wild to reach here before the train. There is his signal-lantern," pointing to the red light which yet burned on the white surface of the snow.

"But I have seen no boy," said the engineer. By

this time all the men had gathered round, and were listening eagerly to the conversation.

"He disappeared just as the train stopped," returned Claire's friend. "Fearful of me, I suppose. He ran away with the sleigh, and I was chasing him up."

"Blame my eyes, if he ain't true grit, then!" exclaimed one of the train-hands. "There's some of us would have been smashed into the next world this minute, only for him. In he a poor boy? Do you know him? If he is I'm shot if Tom Scott sha'n't give him a lift."

"I have met him before," responded Claire, rather eagerly. "He is employed on the railroad now. He says his name is Billy Baggage."

"Billy Baggage. Whew!" whistled the engineer. "Is it that young scamp? Know him? I bet we do. The little rogue; he's got more back-tome than half the men on the line. If I don't leg him till he squeals the next time I see him, it'll be queer."

There was the glint of tears in the man's eyes despite his roughness of speech. He grasped Claire's hand in his strong grip.

"I thank you for your share in it," he warmly claimed. "There are some good men's lives, and that sweet baby of a locomotive, that you've got some share in saving. You won't object to tell me your name, ma'am?"

"Claire Hamilton," she timidly replied.

"I won't forget it soon," he responded. "Now, boys, let's get this rail laid again. And some of you scatter. There's a gentleman riding after the infernal wreckers. Maybe you can help him."

"Can we be of any use?" asked Claire's comrade.

"Yes," was the abrupt answer. "Drive back to Whitehall as if the devil was behind you. Telegraph east and west that there's trouble at this point. No help wanted, but let other trains move carefree."

In two minutes more the sledges were rapidly returning, while the train-men were getting out their tools preparatory to repairing the line.

Meanwhile Adam Clark, the horseman who had ridden in pursuit of the wreckers, passed rapidly up the dim road, his only light being the white reflection from the snow, his horse's footfalls lost in the thick carpet which covered the earth from sight.

The road here was lined with bushes, and he had little hope of finding the villains. The chances were that they had taken to the thickets. He rode on, however, in a forlorn hope. A quarter of a mile beyond the crossing the road branched. It was rather his horse's whim than his own desire that kept him in the main branch, but the event proved that the horse was right.

He had not gone far before a dark patch on the white snow was visible at a short distance in advance.

Touching his horse with the whip in a minute more he had overhauled three men, who were trudging sturdily through the snow, as if heedless or ignorant of his pursuit.

"Stop!" he shouted, without a moment's question to himself that these were the men he had pursued. "Stop, villains! Turn and trudge back, or it will be worse for you. I am armed, and I will shoot on the spot the man who disobeys me."

His voice had in it a fierce, resolute ring that meant work. But in his somewhat hasty course he had not calculated on the number or the spirit of the men he had to deal with.

"Listen to the popinjay!" cried one of them, with a hoarse laugh. "And he's one to three, too, which is bad odds for us."

"Too near; upper time now to turn back for your cold victuals," cried another, jeeringly.

"Wait! this instant! or by Heaven, I'll shoot you in your tracks!"

He put his hand in his pocket for the pistol which should have been there but wasn't. His talk of being armed was mere bluster.

Not so with his antagonists. Clark suddenly found himself covered with the muzzles of three pistols, and a hoarse voice cried out:

"If you had as many lives as two cats we could blow them all out of you before you could count ten. So keep your barker shady, my bold young minx! And don't try to blow after us; till you've got the wind to keep it up."

Clark looked from one to the other, completely nonplussed. The tables had been turned on him with a vengeance.

"You're a brave sort of fellow, and that's the kind of man I like," continued the leader. "Else I'd wing you for your impudence. Get back now, quick as lightning, for my finger is getting nervous. And we don't keep three cursers what you tell about us."

Discretion is the better part of valor. Clark had sufficient true courage not to contend against the impossible. Without a word or a look more he turned his horse and rapidly retraced his path, not quite sure but that one of the rebels vicils might take a fancy to send a bullet after him.

He had ridden back nearly to the trestle when he met several of the brakemen coming up the road in pursuance of the directions of the engineer.

"Are you armed?" he cried.

"No."

"Then turn back. I have met the rascals. They have revolvers and the spirit to use them. If you have anything on the train that will allow a shot, then after them, double quick. They are on the road, the right-hand track; but may take to the fields. I will push on to the next village and rouse the people. The country shall be stirred up for ten miles round but what we take them. It will never do to let such bloody-minded devils escape."

He turned his horse and rode rapidly away again. They looked after him for a minute, until he was swallowed up in the darkness. But in their souls he still rode on, instinct with fire and energy.

Billy Baggage the Railroad Boy.

In one respect he was right. The fugitives did take to the fields. He was hardly out of sight before they leaped the fence, and ran across an open lot, screened from the road by a line of low bushes.

"I'll bet a cow they don't track us," said one.

"I don't know," responded another, anxiously. "There are our marks in the snow. They will last a week in this field."

"The snow ain't all down yet," replied the third. "And it is broken down there in the next road. The horse track there will hide our footprints."

They did not know that there was a pursuer already upon their trail.

The disappearance of Billy Baggage needs explanation. The boy, smart as he was, had not a man's knowledge of the world and its ways. Seeing himself pursued so fiercely by two determined horsemen it did not occur to him that his object would be a plentiful excuse for his suspicious action. And when one of them struck the lantern from his hand with the whip, a dread of some personal injury caused him to spring covertly from the sleigh.

In the excitement attending the approach of the train he had escaped unseen.

He waited in sight of the road until assured of the safety of the cars, then hurried away across an adjoining field, fearful in his mind that he had in some way rendered himself amenable to the laws.

As it happened he was on the exact track of the fugitives. He was beyond the fence and in full hearing of the scene between them and Adam Clark.

And when they themselves took to the fields they had not gone one hundred yards before the young scout was on their trail.

Dark as the night was their track in the virgin snow was easily followed, and Billy kept so incisively near as to have their shadowy outlines constantly in sight.

For a full mile they kept to the fields, crossing a small piece of woodland, and emerging beyond it into a road that ran westward, at a sharp angle to the turnpike they had left.

The snow had ceased here earlier in the day, and was well broken in the center of the road. There was no longer any trail for the boy to follow and he approached nearer, keeping the fugitives in easy view.

He had made one mistake that was likely to prove disastrous to him, forgetting that the men he pursued were as likely to be on the alert as he could be.

He indeed noticed that the group did not look as large as it had done. The light was not sufficient to enable him to distinguish the different persons, and he supposed this change in their general appearance was caused by some vagary of the dim light.

He was destined to be rudely undeceived. He paused a moment, with a vague conception of some sound behind him. Before he could turn, however, a sharp pain shot through his head; a sensation as of a flash of lightning gleamed in his eyes; he fell like a log to the ground, dead or insensible.

"So much for that 'coon," said a deep voice behind him.

It was one of the fugitives, who hurried onward after his comrades, using as a cane the cudgel with which he had flogged the incautious boy, whose lifeless form was left prostrate in the snow.

CHAPTER VI.

RAILROADERS IN COUNCIL.

If boasted of the name of "Saloon," did Joe Dangle's premium, up-town resort for those in need of spirituous comfort. Yet some of the irreverent neighbors dignified it by no higher title than that of "Grogshop," and there were others who satirically called it "Dangle's Whisky Mill."

Yet its shining new sign, and the seductiveness of its artistic doorway, gave silent protest against this lack of respect; and the dignified row of cut-glass decanters within, with their bright-colored contents, were certainly worthy of more honor.

Despite its detractors Dangle's saloon did a thriving business. There was a flow of thirsty visitors to its bar, and out again into the thirst-producing atmosphere. Around the bar-room sat a dozen men engaged in conversation that needed frequent dilation. Others came in and passed through, apparently to some room beyond.

These latter were plainly-dressed men, with rough hands, and faces hardened by contact with hard toil. Mechanics to all appearance, though the long hair and wild eyes of some of them might have given a different interpretation to their business. And among them came the smartly-dressed and rakish individual whom we have met by the name of Blizzard—George Howard's acquaintance.

It was a second-story front room, furnished for assemblies of this nature, and was moderately well-filled with the men whom we have seen passing through the bar-room. They were seated about the room, eagerly conversing, and by the loud tones and excited manner of most of the speakers it was evident that the object of the meeting was one of vital interest to them.

"I tell you all it's just robbery—and I for one don't feel like letting myself be robbed."

The speaker waved his hand in emphasis to his words, with a flowing cup of ale clasped between his fingers.

"Lord! how are we going to help it?" asked another, a stout, dumpy, shrewd-faced fellow.

"Help it! A railroad ain't heaven and earth; and we're white men, I think," protested the first speaker.

"It is easy to talk about kicking ag'in it," said a third speaker, more calmly, "but what good is it goin' to do? Tom Scott says ten per cent. is goin' to be took off of us. Very good. That's a big fish at one end of the line. Now a little minnow at 'other end kicks, and says, 'I won't stand it.' What comes after? The little fish is kicked ashore, that's all. The big fish swims on."

"A good many little fish weigh as much as one big fish," replied the first speaker.

"He's only got to say the word, and out we go," remarked the dumpy chap. "See here, boys, the country's starving. Men without meat in their pans and flour in their barrels ain't going to care much what we like or don't like. Out go the old railroaders. In come the new railroaders. Who's to hinder, I'd like to know?"

"We're going to hinder!" replied Joe Blizzard, pressing forward, and setting his shining bat at a new angle on his head. "We'll stop the trains running, fling them from the track, drub any chap that dares to put his finger into our pie. I'll swear if there ain't a Jack for every Jill! We're the lads to show Tom Scott that engineers and train hands ain't babies to be coddled out of our berths by any interlopers."

"I don't know but there might be something in it," remarked the first speaker. "If we give in quietly now, there'll be another cut before three months. I can see which way the dog's tail wags. We'd best kick at the start than kick at the end."

"You'll only kick your own shins, no matter at which end you kick," said the matter-of-fact, dumpy man.

"That's all stuff!" cried Joe Blizzard. "They've got nerves too, and them's in their pocket-books. Make them feel it there, and they won't be so independent. Smash up a train here, and a train there, and let them know what it's for. They won't."

"Drop all that!" exclaimed a shrill voice from behind them, and a shock-headed, snub-nosed man pressed forward. "No such incendiary measures won't do. While we're smashing trains we're smashing body and soul of our own comrades. Think of that, boys. I'm the chap as can bust the head of any devil that says train-smashing."

The speaker glared so fiercely at Blizzard that the latter was fain to nip in the bud his intended answer, and withdraw to another part of the room.

"It is a devilish business, that's a fact," said another person, who had entered unobserved. "It was tried on only last night, just beyond Haverford Station. A heavy freight train came within an ace of being broken into kindling wood. It wasn't the cars, though. But there was Bill Bourne, one of the best engineers on the road, and a dozen more good men. Suppose they had been murdered?"

The speaker stood forward, showing a handsome face and a stalwart frame. It was the well-knit and well-dressed form of George Howard.

"They were warned, blast them!" muttered Elizabeth, between his teeth. "If they won't take warning, they make their own funerals."

Howard's eyes were fixed warningly on the face of the speaker. But the words spoken were not intended to be audible. Blizzard moved away, as if he could not bear being closely looked at.

"That's not the p'int," exclaimed another. "We come here to talk over the strike."

"It's no strike that don't strike from the branches to the roots of society," cried one of the long-haired men, springing on a chair. "To the roots, fellow-sufferers. There's where we must lay the ax. Tell you society is rotten to the core. Starvation is rampant. Talk about smashing up a train or two! Trains are nothing. The world must be regenerated. What if mills burn? What if blood runs? What if capitalists howl? Isn't it time the rich was under foot? Isn't it time the poor man was rising like the froth on—on—"

"Upset that beer mug, somebody, and spill his froth!" cried a voice from across the room.

"An eye for an eye! A tooth for a tooth!" yelled out another wild-eyed man, as he sprang to the top of a table, brandishing his arms like the sails of a windmill. "We must to arms, men of the Nineteenth Century! We must strike for our rights! If blood flows, can it wash out all the misery; can it quench all the thirst, can it feed all the hunger that—"

He had got thus far in his Communistic harangue, when a heavy body struck against the table, tilting it over, and sending the impromptu orator headlong to measure his length upon the hard floor, with all the revolutionary ideas fairly shocked out of him.

"Like ter know who pushed!" hiccupped a tipsy individual, recovering from the stumble he had given against the table. "That war kind of purty, that war. Here's whisky—whis-ky—a dollar a quart. It's a outrage, gen'lemen; deuced outrage. It's all monopoly—and monopoly's a con-con-con-con somethin'. Durned if it ain't!"

The speaker went tacking and filling across the floor, finally bringing up against the Communistic orator, who was just regaining his feet. Down the pair of them went into an indiscriminate heap.

"Best fling them both out the window," said a hard-handed engineer. "We don't want French fire-brands, nor Yankee rum here. I reckon we're reasonable, moderate American citizens, who only ask a man's rights."

"That's the right ring for a man's voice. I'm with you there," said George Howard. "Men's rights let it be; but no bloodthirsty agitators here."

"Out with the Internationalists!" cried a score of voices.

Before any action could be taken, however, the tipsy man struggled to his feet.

"Taint blood I want!" he rolled out. "I'm a law-abiding citizen. I'm Jacob Baggage, and the Baggages are all gentlemen. Be calm, feller-friends. Repress your agitation. Talk 'bout blood. Why, I wouldn't give a jigger of old Mongahaley fur a bar'l of blood."

And the virtuous expression on his face showed that he meant it.

"Is this him? Is this the agitator?" asked a brawny-armed railroad man, taking the tipsy man by the shoulder with no gentle hand.

"That's him," said Blizzard, with a comical blink in his eye.

"Here goes with him, then," and Mr. Baggage was started on an uncomfortable run to the door.

"I 'peal to you, gen'lemen!" he cried, waving his arms desperately. "I 'peal to you, as a feller-engineer. Run a canal-boat, once, from Manayunk to the Falls. An' is this my reward? Me—a first-class, spink-spank, high-up, old hoss of a instertion; to be rolled out like a bar'l of condemned redye! I 'peal once more, feller-natives!"

But this last appeal was lost in the far distance, as he was rumbled incontinently out of the room, and sent rolling down the steep stairs, fetching up at the bottom a groaning ball of humanity.

The true agitators, whose sins had been thus vicariously atoned for, kept discreetly quiet for the remainder of the meeting, satisfied that this was no proper opening for the promulgation of their peculiar views.

Yet some of the railroad men were violent enough in their ideas, stopping short, however, of anything like damage to life or limb, while advocating a strike, with decisive measures against the property of the company.

As for George Howard, whatever his ultimate views, he was on this occasion on the side of those who advocated submission to the company.

This was the view of the majority of those present, and the few extremists were forced to yield to the sober good sense of the great mass of the meeting.

Even Joe Blizzard changed his tune, and came out as an advocate of submission. Yet he took an opportunity to say in an aside to Howard:

"Ain't you getting thunderingly meek and docile? I never saw such a lamb."

"Best float with the tide when it's too strong to swim against it," was Howard's reply. "If we want to keep any influence over these men we must move with them."

"That's nice," said Blizzard to himself, after Howard had turned away. "But I've got my ways, too, and I don't trust you altogether."

His ways seemed to be shared by others there, to judge by his mysterious cornerings and conferences.

CHAPTER VII.

BILLY LIONIZED.

But we must return to the young hero who had just so distinguished himself in saving a train from destruction, and whom we left lying insensible upon the freezing snows of a lonely country road.

Fortunately his senses soon returned, and he woke to find himself chilled to the bone, and at a loss for some minutes to tell where he was, or how he came there.

He dragged himself slowly to his feet, and staggered rather than walked through the chill night air, the cold seeming to penetrate to his very bones.

He worked his arms like the sails of a windmill, to try and bring back some animation to his half-frozen body. He essayed running, too, with limbs so stiff that they would hardly support him.

"I've got to limber myself up, if I have to polish my bones with a fence rail," he muttered. "Talk about frozen ducks! A feller might as well, at once, be cut out of marble. Couldn't nohow be stiffer. I've got to bunk somewhere, and put this right on top of last night, afore Billy Baggage is himself ag'in."

But the boy was of a vital temperament, and active exercise soon brought the warm blood coursing again to his extremities. His limbs regained their suppleness, his brain grew active, he threw off the depressing influence of the cold.

"If I weren't sold cheap then there's no snakes," he soliloquized. "Jist to think of a feller like me brung up among folks that's got brains like steel traps, to let myself be done for by them three rail-road-rippers. It's no wonder I'm dead ashamed of myself. I couldn't face a goose now without blushing where them coves went, anyhow!"

His soliloquy was interrupted by the sound of voices and hoofs near at hand. In a minute or two more a small group of horsemen rode up to him. They drew rein as they saw him trudging along the road, one of them calling out to him:

"Which way have you come, boy?"

"From behind me," answered Billy, not liking this imperious tone. "Goin' on ahead of me."

"Hello! You've got a smart young rooster there, Clark," said another horseman.

"They grow them smart down our way. True grit, and game to the backbone," replied Billy, walking on.

"Ha! I'll swear if this ain't the youngster that ran away with the sleigh," cried Clark. "Own up, boy, was it not you?"

"Dunno what you're blowin' bout now," returned Billy, edging toward the fence, with intent to run for his liberty if necessary. "Seen sleigh go by here like greased-lightnin' a bit ago. Maybe somebody stole it arterward."

"Hold, Billy," said Clark, laughing at the distrust of the boy. "You saved the train like a hero; so you needn't fear us, we won't hurt you. We are af'er the devils who tried to wreck the train. Have you seen them?"

"You bet!" cried Billy, energetically. "One of them wrecked me, 'bout a mile back here, on the road. Guv me a clip with a club that would have beaten my brain-pan in if it hadn't been made cast-steel."

"Ah! that is interesting," exclaimed another of the horsemen. "Do you know which way they went?"

"Left me in the snow, dreamin' of what sort of grub I'm goin' to have for to-morrow's breakfas," retorted Billy. "Found it sich a comfor'bis bed that I forgot to lor' arter them."

"Good-by, then," said Clark, laughing. "We will look after them."

Giving reins to their horses the cavalcade swept on, leaving Billy standing alone in the road.

"Well, now, if they ain't gone! And where's a feller of my size goin' to find a clean bed to sleep in to-night? That's what I wanted to ax them, and clear forgot. I hope nobody don't take me for a tramp and set their dogs on me. Don't think I'd like to be chopped up into dog provender."

He walked on, looking wistfully but fearfully at the various houses he passed.

He had made about a mile further in his lonely journey, when his keen eyes caught, in the dim gloom of the night, the dark outlines of several figures in advance.

Remembering his former misadventure, Billy drew warily to the shelter of the roadside hedge, and approached as closely as he dared. He now distinctly made out the forms of three men.

"Tread ag'in!" he muttered. "I'm in luck, to-night."

He had not far to follow them. In less than five minutes they passed through a gateway in the hedge, and made their way to a house that stood a short distance back from the road.

The young scout reached the gate in time to see them enter and disappear within the doorway of the house. He stood examining this edifice with critical eyes. It was the plain, frame house of an unpretentious farmer, or just such an undignified mansion as might have been used for less honest purposes.

"I'm going to have a squint in, anyhow," thought Billy. "There's a light at that back window. I don't keer if I git a clout on t'other side of the head."

In a minute he was at the window, his eyes glued to the pane. He took but one look through, then dropped hastily down, and made the best of his way out of the line of light.

"Jist as I thought," he muttered. "I knowed George Howard had a finger in that pie. There he is, big and busy as ever. Dunno the others, but I've got him naimed, anyhow. I'm bound to post Miss Claire 'bout him. And there's a barn, too. Wonder if I can git in? Hay's as good as feathers, these times."

He was successful in making entry, unseen. In five minutes more our young adventurer was buried to the neck in a bed of hay. In ten minutes he had made a long journey into the land of Nod.

The sun was well up the next morning when Billy opened his eyes and gazed questioningly around at the situation.

It was a strongly-built frame barn, the shingled roof white with wasps' nests, and beneath him a plentiful supply of hay. From the stable, beneath him could hear the lowing of cattle, and the sound of men's voices came faintly to his ears from a distance.

"They'll swear I'm a tramp, sure, if I don't circumvent them," decided Billy, as he crept to the opening, up which he had climbed the previous evening.

"There's nothin' here but cows and hoses, anyhow. That's some comfort. They can't blab on a feller. If there ain't no two-legged critters now nosing 'round."

It was with infinite caution that the boy made his way down to the first floor of the barn, surveyed by the large, mild eyes of an Alderney cow that occupied the next stall.

"You kin look, miss," said Billy, politely, to the cow. "As long as there ain't no tanner dogs about I don't keer a farthin'. Somehow I can't go dogs. They're allers got too much to say; and speak afore they're spoke to. Don't see nothin' on two legs 'cept a rooster. Guess I'll sneak out the back door."

He was successful in his enterprise. There was nobody in sight from the rear of the barn, and he crossed the barn-yard gingerly to an orchard that lay beyond. Stealing along the fence of this he soon put a considerable distance between himself and the house, unnoticed by some men who were repairing the fence of an adjoining field.

"So fur, so good," remarked Billy, drawing a breath of relief. "Mightn't be healthy fur me to be coctched 'round here by George Howard and his gang. S'pose they'd twig me? I'd be in fur a hot Christmas, sure."

As he talked to himself he hurried on over the now frozen surface of the snow. There had been a sprinkle of rain later in the night, and it had tightened to a firm, slippery crust.

Billy enjoyed the slipping and sliding for awhile, but the demands of a hearty appetite began to remind him that breakfast-time was passing.

"I'm a good ways off from a station, too," he thought. "Guess I'd best strike some of the farmers 'bout here. They wouldn't go back on givin' a bite and a glass of milk to a poor orphan."

He had now gained a country road, and as the crust of the snow had been broken by some passing wagons, he was able to make more rapid headway. It was now an hour and more since he had made his exit from the barn, and he was several miles away from that dangerous locality.

He trudged on along the snowy road and through the chill northerly wind, beginning to get a little tired of the monotony of a morning unbroken by the pleasant excitement of a breakfast.

"There's a house now that's got a generous front door, fur as I kin see with the sun in my eyes. Bet I'll try it, anyhow."

Billy slipped over the glassy fence, and slid up a tree-lined path on which only a double-jointed boy could have kept his footing. He reached the house without a fall, and made his way boldly up the steps to the front porch, giving a ringing knock on the door.

"I'd bet I've seen this place afore," he solicited, "only I've got so much of the sun in my

eyes. There's a kind of familiar feel in these timberas, as if I'd had my feet on them afore now."

The door opened, and Billy's eyes, half-blinded by the glare of the sun on the snow, essayed in vain to make out the form before him.

"I'm a poor orphing," he began. "I'm from Philly. I ain't no tramp though, nōhow you kin pile it. But a bit of breakfass wouldn't go crooked, jist now."

A merry child's laugh broke into his awkward effort at begging.

"Well, I'll declare if it isn't Billy Baggage!" cried a musical voice. "You don't know how glad I am. And letting on not to know me, too!"

Billy dashed his hand across his eyes, and looked around him again.

"I'll swoow, if his don't beat!" he said. "Didn't know I was inside of ten miles of here. It's Mr. Hamilton's for sure. And this is Lucy!"

"Of course," replied the child. "Who else would I be? Come in now, you can't see anybody out there."

Grasping his hand in both of hers she drew him into the house and closed the door behind him.

"If you only knew!" she exclaimed, dancing around him. "And to think of your coming here, and not knowing it! It is just too funny for anything."

"Oh! I was jist covortin' round the country, that's all," said Billy, deprecatingly. "Got the looks of things tied up into a bow-knot, and couldn't git them flattened out. I see my way clear now, though."

"Where?" asked Lucy.

"In them bright blue eyes of yours, little gal. There's breakfast, and everything that's nice, shin-in' out of them."

"Oh! now!" cried Lucy, tapping his hand in punishment. "But come right away. You must be hungry, Billy."

"Hungry? I could gnaw right through a stone wall."

She grasped his hand and drew him onward rapidly, as if afraid he might make an assault on the stairway, or the front wall of the house.

"You don't know!" she exclaimed. "Aunt Claire told us all about it. She said you were ever so brave, and queer, and outrageous. And that you saved ever so many men from being killed. And that— Oh! you dear, good boy, I can't talk about it!"

And she sprung up and kissed Billy with all the fervor of her pure young soul.

"Now jist you shut up, Lucy," said Billy, with a look of shame. "Ain't no use tryin' to make gold dollars out of nickel-plated brasslike me. S'pose we discuss that breakfast, and stop discussin' nonsense."

But the boy did not get through his morning meal with as much peace as he desired. For Lucy danced about him like a fairy, interrupting every second mouthful, and pressing him with dainties innumerable. And Claire came in, and there was renewed talking, and praising, and pressing of hands. Mr. Hamilton followed, with his warm opinions of Billy's bravery. And even the old colored coachman had his say to the effect:

"Thar was jist sick boys down Souf. Didn't know the breed grew up Norf here."

"Now I wish you folks would jest clear out, and let a feller drag through. I ain't no hero, and no nothin' 'cept little Billy Baggage; and I don't like no butter on hard crackers, like me. And I want to finish my breakfast."

With a laugh at his perversity he was left to the tender mercies of Lucy, who could in no way be coaxed or driven from the care of her new acquisition.

But that long and deep breakfast ended, as all sublunary things must end. It was a happy day that Billy passed, and he was lionized to an extent that did not quite agree with his sense of justice.

"For it weren't so much arter all, jist swingid a lantern," he explained. "And if it hadn't been fur Miss Claire's sleigh it would have been all up with them. So I guess it was as much the boss as me."

The sun soon softened the hard crust of the snow, and Billy's sliding with Little Lucy in the back yard, was changed for a sleigh-ride with Miss Claire, and the boy was happy in the swift motion, and the bracing air, and the merry jingle of the bells.

"Don't let that sleigh catch us, Miss Claire!" he exclaimed, as an echoing jingle came from down the road. "The feller is makin' his best pace, and I know he's countin' high on passin' our team."

Claire stirred up her horse, but it was no match for her pursuer, and they were soon overhauled by a natty little sleigh, drawn by a quick-stepping bay horse.

"Who have you there, Miss Hamilton?" cried the gentleman driving. "Why, I declare, it is our boy of the railroad rescue. Where in the world did you pick him up?"

It was the voice of Claire's friend, Adam Clark.

"Didn't catch them last night, I reckon!" Billy grimly inquired.

"No. We found their tracks, but could not trace them far."

"Known it," was Billy's short rejoinder.

The two sleighs kept side by side for some distance, a running fire of small talk being kept up by the gentleman and lady, to the exclusion of their silent listener, who sat back with his eyes fixed critically on Mr. Clark's face.

"Is he sweet, too?" asked Billy, after the sleighs had parted company.

"Who? I don't understand you," Claire coldly replied.

"I see that. No matter. He ain't quite my style, that's all. Better than t'other one, though."

"What other one?"

"Guess you oughter know," replied Billy, looking

up at her critically. "That Howard chap. Guv you some p'ints 'bout him afore, you know."

She looked at him silently for a minute, a strange expression in her dark eyes.

"I have not forgotten what you said," she answered. "Have you anything more to say?"

"More than I'd like, Miss Claire," said Billy, hesitatingly. "Won't hurt your feelin's if I come right out now."

"You may speak plain'y," she returned, in a strangely emotionless voice.

"It was only a s'picion afore," he replied. "Now it's a sure jig. George Howard had a hand in that business last night. I seen him in it just as plain as I see you this minute."

It was with a sound like a choking sob that she dropped her veil. The boy looked at her with earnest pity. He then grasped the reins from her loosened hands and drove silently homeward.

It was by an early train the next day that Billy made his way back to Philadelphia, leaving as deep unseen effects of his work behind him as in its evident results.

It was for these latter that he was hailed with acclamation at the depot building. Tidings of his coming had reached the city, and he had to repeat his story a dozen times to various lionizing groups.

It did not take him very long to get tired of his sort of business, and he at length broke away from his much-praising friends, exclaiming:

"There never weren't no use runnin' a thing into the ground. And I ain't a-goin' to be buzzed into a brain-fever 'cause I happened to swing a lantern jist the right nick of time."

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE ROAD.

A MONTH has passed since the date of our last chapter. Billy is again on the road, at his old position in the baggage-car. But he is not without reward for his brave action in saving the freight-train from destruction. He has not only received the personal thanks of Colonel Scott and other officers of the road, but has been given a welcome increase of salary, which enables him to add somewhat to the comfort of his hard-worked mother, and to the appearance of the dilapidated wreck of a mansion which he calls by the endearing title of home.

It is a bright day in January, and the train is running smoothly along west of Harrisburg, the only evidence of winter visible being patches of snow in the fence corners, and in shaded nooks on the hill-sides; and the fetters of ice which have tamed the rapid waters of the blue Juniata.

It is a beautiful sight, and Billy sits looking out at the rounded hills, and at the streams curving so gracefully round their base, as if the scene was a new one to his admiring eyes.

For an hour he had sat thus, looking at the gliding miles, while Harry Bodkin was busy behind him, with pen and paper and knitted brow, working out some dimly complicated enigma of freight.

Two other men were in the car, a conductor and an express-agent, busily engaged in conversation.

Billy's reverie was brought to an end by the tones of a familiar voice behind him.

"Dat's fine fun, ain't it? I dinks so. Anybody see Pilly Paggy?"

"Hullo, Hans!" cried Billy, springing up suddenly. "Get through, hey? Sold out all your Injin-rubber gum-drops?"

"Yaw, breddy near," replied Hans, taking the seat which Billy had vacated. "Pig run on gummers. What's der news, Pilly?"

"I don't know nothin' new," said Billy, indolently. "We're goin' west, regular lick-a-split. I spose we'll fetch up somewhere arterwhile, if we don't b'fore we get there."

Hans looked up in stupid wonder.

"It'll be somewere—or it'll be some other vare—or it'll be novare, I spec': dat's ferry plain."

"You've got to take it like you take pills, Hans. Roll it up in something sweet, and swaller it down without winkin'."

"What for?" asked Hans, looking up in alarm, as if sure that Billy was going to administer some disagreeable dose.

"To keep it from lodgin' on the sides; that's all," said Billy, in a grave tone. "I alfers like to take medicine that way. Slip the pill out, and swaller the perserves. It does a sick feller a lot of good, that way."

Hans looked at him a moment in silence; then broke out into a loud laugh.

"Dey'd be nice in a gummer—hey, Pilly? But what's dis 'pout medicin'? Nopaty didn't say anypote was sick, hey?"

"Yes, you, in your upper story," replied Billy. "Say, Hans, s'pose we drop this and come down to bizness. Maybe you don't recollect the big, black-whiskered, canvas-back duck I p'inted out to you jist now?"

"Der man with der red necktie?"

"You've twiggid him! I knowed you weren't so stupid as you've been playin'."

"Yaw," said Hans, throwing himself back with a proud look. "He pought three poxes of gum-drops. Level head chap. Dat's your sort."

"Now won't somebody take him out and drown him?" cried Billy, in a tone of intense aggravation.

"Hallo, youngster, what's the matter?" cried the conductor, looking up.

"I've been tryin' to drive an idea into this Dutchman's head. But it's too soft to hold. It jist slips through, and ten blacksmiths couldn't clinch it."

"Maybe you'd better try it on mine," said the conductor. "It might get into more solid wood there."

"I dunno," returned Billy, with a comical look.

Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.

"S'pose you know whether it's a wooden head or not."

"The boy wants bad to call you a blockhead, Mr. Perkins," called out Harry Bodkin. "Only he thinks it is safest to beat around the bush."

"Oh, yes!" returned Billy. "I'm a 'cute kind of chap, I am; and afeard of folks, too, I s'pose. Tain't no harm not to be impudent, I guess."

"Dat ain't you den," said Hans. "D don't you call me dis morning only, Kittle-trum? Like ter know if Kittle-trum ain't impudent now?"

"No. It's the solidest kind of truth," retorted Billy. "A feller mought hammer at you for a life-time and not git nothin' but empty noise out of you. I'll tell you who it was, Mr. Perkins. Do you know the chap that kicked me out the car last summer, and come near leavin' nothing of me but a grease-spot?"

"I have not forgotten the circumstance," replied the conductor.

"It was all so sudden that I hadn't time to photograph the galoot," continued Billy. "Couldn't swear to him, you know. Fur all that I'd go a bannar that he's aboard the train this blessed minute."

"The deuce he is!" cried Harry Bodkin, upsetting his papers in his quick start.

"I don't know him enough to grab him on," replied Billy. "But it's enough to twig him on. To watcn him, you know; with a black patch over one eye, and a opera-glass in t'other. If it's him he ain't here arter no good. You kin bet high on that."

"Where is he, Billy?" asked the conductor.

"In the palace car," replied the boy. "He's a high old hoss, he is. But he don't shut my eyes up with a palace-car ticket. If there ain't somethin' gives way on this road afore we're a week older, then let me git. He's workin' up his little game, sure."

"There has been something loose about the road for a good while now," declared the express-agent. "Baggage and express packages have been walking off without hands, and it is about time there was a hauling over the coals. We have a set of regular foxes to deal with."

"And will have to be foxy ourselves to nail them," broke in Harry Bodkin.

"That's my way of looking at it," replied the agent. "It lays just here, boys. There's been things done that couldn't be done without somebody aboard the trains to help. The question is, who is this confederate?"

"No. It ain't no sich question," said Billy, sharply.

"Hallo! Tom, you're took up now," exclaimed Mr. Perkins, laughing. "What is the question then, Billy?"

"A still tongue makes a wise head," retorted Billy. "How do you know but some of us were this confederate? How do you know but what maybe it were me? And you blurtin' it out, and puttin' a chap on his muscle!"

Billy looked his disgust at this marked lack of caution in the agent.

"I don't think it was you," replied the other, smiling. "And I fancy all here are safe enough."

"I don't b'lieve I'm safe," responded Billy. "I dunno what I mought do. And if I can't vote fur myself I won't vote fur no other cannderdate. That's my poleritics."

Harry Bodkin looked askance at his youthful assistant.

"Put yourself on their track, Billy," he said, with a peculiar smile. "If you grab them I'll share the plunner with you."

"I'm a littl' young to turn thief-catcher," replied Billy. "And I don't think I'd quite like the job. But if you've got any other sort of light and respectable work on hand, I'm your hoss."

It was a tune very like "Yankee Doodle" that Billy whistled as he walked through the car with his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

The agent and conductor laughed at the boy's remark as they left the car. He followed them as soon as he had finished his tune. He found Tom Erskine, the agent, alone in the express-car.

"I hope you ain't busy," said Billy, hunting a seat among the multiplicity of packages that covered the floor of the car.

"What difference does that make to you?" asked Tom, quickly.

"I want to learn you somethin', that's all," replied Billy. "I'm goin' to buzz a little of my notions into your ears, if you're in the takin' humor."

"Well, what is it all about?"

"Somethin' to the tune of what I jist said, that a still tongue makes a wise head."

Tom laughed as he gave up the task at which he was engaged, and seated himself beside Billy.

"Buzz away now, my busy bee," he cried, cheerily.

"So you think I talk too freely, eh?"

"I don't think a boy knows more than a man," replied Billy. "I ain't none of that kind of hyfalusin' shuck-ups. But a boy that's seen beans knows more than a man that ain't seen beans. And I've seen beans in this bizness."

"What kind of beans?"

"Blue beans," said Billy, with a grimace. "Jist the bluest. I've got somethin' to tell you, Mr. Erskine, that ain't fur everybody's ears."

The two confederates were plunged for the next hour into a deep conversation in which Billy impressed his opinions strongly on the agent, and a regular plan of action was blo'ked out.

And now we mu't leap with the reader over several days, in which our hero and his new ally, Mr. Tom Erskine, had kept themselves busy.

Billy had no scruples of conscience against following the man with the red necktie, and had suc-

ceeded in gaining some points of great value in the furtherance of their plans.

"I's'pose we could nab this chap now, jist as easy as winking. And nail him too," he remarked to the agent. "But that'd be doin' half a job and callin' it a whole one. That's not my way."

"The other plan is the best," replied Tom. "With proper management we may get the whole gang. But it is deuced risky for you, Billy."

"Jist wait till I squeal ag'in the risk," retorted Billy. "I'm only a little feller, and ain't cut my wisdom teeth yet. But that's no harm. A little cat kin jump outer a littler bag than a big one. And then there's sich a thing as bein' too smart. Some fellers are so blamed smart that they jump clean through their jobs, and hit their noses on the other side. That ain't me neither."

"There's nothing like confidence in ourselves," said the agent, laughing. "I think you will get along, Billy."

That same day the man with the red necktie fell again under the keen eyes of Billy Baggage.

A peculiarly-shaped trunk had been placed, momentarily, on the platform at Pittsburgh, after being checked, and the youthful scout had caught sight of the party under his surveillance practicing some quick manipulations about this piece of baggage.

The train was an hour on the way when our young detective sought Tom Erskine, in the express car.

"All O.K.," he announced. "He's bit; and bit deep."

"The check—"

"Yes, yes," said Billy, with a hasty look around. "He's bi', that's enough. Least said, now, soonest cured. But if somebody calculates to find di'monds and silk han'kerchers in that there dry-goods box, somebody's goin' to be sold."

"Checked for where, Billy?"

"Lancaster—I want you to have some special private business with Harry Bodkin jist afore we git there. A job ain't half a job that's got too many noses in it; and if I'd been goin' to take in Harry, I wouldn't a' took you in."

"I'll get him out. Don't you fear," replied Tom.

It was dusk when the train stopped at Lancaster. Harry Bodkin hurried back from his half hour's conversation with Tom Erskine to put off some trunks which were checked for this point. Among these was the black leather-covered Saratoga, which had been under Billy's surveillance.

"I'll be shot if that trunk don't seem to have got heavier since we put it on at Pittsburg," cried Harry, as he tugged away at it.

"Some of these women pack their fixings in so fearful close," remarked the Lancaster baggage porter, as he helped off with it.

"Where in the thunder is Billy Baggage?" called out Harry, in a vexed tone. "He is a good hand at being out of sight when wanted."

Billy remained out of sight during the balance of their Journey. Nor did he turn up when the train reached Philadelphia. He had, somehow, mysteriously disappeared.

Meanwhile the trunk was rolling along a suburb of Lancaster, in an open wagon, whose jolting brought something that sounded not unlike groans from the huge leather Saratoga.

CHAPTER IX. BILLY'S DÉBUT.

We must follow the fortunes of the runaway trunk which we left rolling through the streets of Lancaster, jolted in an open wagon, and groaning in its leather joints at every jolt.

Two men were on the seat of the wagon, the driver, an evident son of the Emerald Isle, and a small, dark-featured, sour-looking man, who held firmly to the side of the bumping conveyance.

"Good gracious, I wish I'd got my life insured before I trusted myself in your patent jumper," he grumbled.

"Sure it'll settle your supper, anyway; and that's something," replied Pat. "If you'd ever rid in a jaunting-car, in the old country, you'd be swearin' this was a feather-bed."

"Then Heaven save me from your jaunting-car."

"It's the roads that makes them alsy," declared Pat, confidently. "If you'd been on an Irish road now, you'd been rocked to sleep this blessed minute with the swate motion of it, stead of grumblin' at the cobbles."

"What a wonderful island that must be, that little island beyond the sea," replied Pat's passenger, unconsciously rhyming. "It's so remarkable for soft roads, meaty potatoes, and—emigrants."

"Oh, faith!" returned Pat, scratching his head vigorously. "it's out of pure charity we lave the old sod. It's only to show you folks across the says how roads are to be made and praties to be growed. This was not a step we'd star if it wasn't for our good hearts."

The short man answered with a dissatisfied sniff of laughter.

"Here we are, Pat," he cried, after a minute's silence. "Leud a hand now, lad, and off with the trunk. I suppose that's some of your Irish benevolence, too, to help with trunks and the like?"

"We're always ready to do a good turn," replied Pat, cheerily. "There's something in an Irishman's skin that makes him good-natured whether he will or no. But it's a heavy trunk you have here, mister. What's in it now, for all the world?"

"Nothing but clothes."

"They must have been put in with a pile-driver, then. I could have swore it was paving-stones," grumbled Pat, as he helped out with the heavy trunk.

The house they had stopped at was one of a row of

three-story bricks, in an outer street of the town. The snow-clad fields lay in full view beyond.

The heavy burden was carried in and deposited in an upper room. In a minute more the rattle of Pat's wagon could be heard, to the tune of a cheery song with which he beguiled his way.

"What luck?" came in a hoarse voice from a large, black-whiskered man, who seemed the sole occupant of the house. "Any prying, or disagreeable questions?"

"Not a bit. The check was all correct. Your share was done well in changin' the checks."

"And yours in bringing the trunk?" responded the large man. "I've a notion we've got a prize, Tim."

"Is Joe here?"

"He's stepped down to Gordon's to wet his whistle. I expect him back soon."

"All right. I wish we had a key to this clothesbox." And Tim made a vigorous effort to raise the lid.

"Wait till Joe comes," responded the large man. "He'd open it if it had sixteen combination locks. Joe's a perfect genius with a key."

"Well, then, for Satan's sake, let's hunt something eatable. I'm as hungry as a starved cow. Whatever's in the trunk will wait."

Yet there is such a thing as being too sure, and Tim made a serious error in his confidence that the contents of the trunk would wait.

His conclusion would, no doubt, have been a natural one with any reasonable trunk. But this weighty prize was just one of those odd affairs that can't be brought to listen to reason. Hardly had the door closed behind the two men before a queer fumbling noise commenced within the dark colored, high-topped affair that had been deposited at one side of the room.

The fumbling continued, accompanied with a scratching sound, and immediately afterward followed by a sharp click, like the opening of a lock.

The noises ceased, and perfect silence reigned for the space of a minute. Then any one in the room would have been surprised to see a slow upward movement of the trunk lid. The gradual motion continued, until an opening of an inch width appeared. There was nothing to show the cause of this movement. The room was quite dusky in the fading light of day, and all locked dark through this opening.

Suddenly the door of the room opened, and down went the automatic trunk-lid.

"Where the fire did I drop my pocket-lock?" growled Tim, as he peered keenly about the room.

"Deuced stupid of me. Oh! here it is."

As he stooped to pick up the lost purse he was startled by a queer, husky, smothered sound from the direction of the trunk.

"What the blazes is that?" he ejaculated, staring with wide-opened eyes into the vacancy before him.

The noise was repeated, a rumbling, husky sound.

"Good Lord!" muttered Tim, backing slowly toward the door, his brain full of superstitious fears.

"I wonder if the old shanty's haunted? I wish Joe was here; he don't fear ghost nor devil."

Groping behind him he grasped the knob of the door, his startled eyes fixed on that shadowy corner of the room from which the sound had seemed to come, but which was now of deathly silence.

The door opened to his nerveless hand, and, with a quick spring he leaped through it, closing it with a bang behind him.

Almost at the same instant the lid of the trunk flew up, as if it was a living thing, and a sound not unlike a laugh came from within it.

In the dark opening appeared a short figure, whose face only showed plainly in the gathering gloom.

"Well, I'll be sold for a pint of peanuts, if that ain't too good for anything" spoke a chuckling voice, as the figure stepped out onto the floor.

"Couldn't help 'oughin' if I'd a' bu'sted, tryin' and began to think the jig was played. But if that blamed galoot didn't take me for a g'ol, there's no use talkin'." I'm just as stiff as an' cr'k leg, and dunno whether I'm made out of bones or out of timber."

The boy danced about the room, trying to limber himself up.

"Sich a thundrin' joltin' as I got! I could ha' sworn that they had me strung up by a string, and was havin' g'aving ston's at me. Had to groan a bit to ease my feelings. Guess though they thought it was the old trunk."

Reminded that the trunk lid still stood wide open, he quickly closed and locked it.

"We'll give them the trouble of gettin' it open, anyhow," he decided. "If their hopes has got to be sp'iled, it ain't fair to spile them all at once. Best break it to 'em slow. And now, Billy Baggage, it's time you was makin' yourself scarce. No tellin' how soon that feller may be back to take another sniff at his ghost. If they catch me here you mought trade what was left of me to-morror for a link of Bologna sausages."

But Billy's retreat was intercepted. As he opened the room door, with intent to make his escape from that dangerous locality, he heard the lower door of the house open and shut, and loud voices of persons who had just entered the rooms below.

"I ain't easy skered," spoke a voice which he recognized, "but I bet there ain't one of you would have stood it better than I did."

"Ah! dry up!" came in sharp tones, which Billy remembered having heard before. "A fellow that's been through as much fire and water as Tim Dalton to get scared by a cricket's chirrup. Come on, Hughey. I don't think you care for anything living."

"Nor dead either," responded the deep tones of the black-whiskered man.

Billy looked intently around him. Things here

were coming to too close quarters. Escape must be made at once from that room if he had to jump from the window.

He saw that he was in a narrow, unfurnished room, with one window and three doors. Hastily opening the nearest of these he found it to lead into a closet. Billy tried the expedient of squeezing himself into this receptacle, but found it too narrow for a boy of half his size.

"And I'm a Jack to think they wouldn't look there the first place," he muttered, as he tried the third door.

This opened and revealed beyond it a smaller room, from which another door opened outward.

"That's O. K.," thought Billy, closing the door behind him.

He stooped down and took off his shoes, which he slung over his shoulder after tying their strings together.

"I ain't goin' to leave till things git hot," he muttered, "and then I don't want to stump out in these stories. A feller's got to walk like a fly on a tight-rope to git out of a place like this without bein' heered."

His soliloquy was broken by the abrupt entrance of the three men to the room he had just left. They carried a light which illuminated the room, and shone with a red glare into their faces.

"Yes; you needn't be afraid but what I'd known you ag'in," was Billy's mental remark. "You didn't need to bring a candle to light up your handsome countenances. But who's your new crony? Why don't he turn his phiz this way? Ah, yes! I thought I knew him. It's that same smart rooster I seen talkin' to George Howard, down on Fifth street, that day. I'm gettin' this gang down to nine p'ints, sure as you live."

While these thoughts were passing through his mind the three men, whom he had been surveying through a slight crack in the door, were looking curiously about the room.

"Where's all your ghosts, Tim?" asked Hughey, the black-whiskered man. "They can't stand a penny-dip."

"You can laugh till you're blind, but there was a durned queer noise," asserted Tim.

"Mayoe they've retired into the trunk, not liking our company," said the third man, who was indeed Joe Blizzard, as Billy had guessed.

He took hold of the handle of the trunk, and lightly lifted it.

"Don't weigh much," he continued. "But, then, ghosts are light. And it's mighty light sort of baggage, too."

"Light? Thunder!" ejaculated Tim. "It's as heavy as lead. No use trying your pranks on us, Joe."

He ran hastily across the room, and grasped the end of the trunk.

"That depends on how much lead you mean," retorted Joe, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, I hope I may be ratanned for a donkey if there ain't something heavier than a ghost has gone out of this trunk. Try it for yourself, Hughey; then maybe you won't find so much to laugh at."

"By the blue blazes, Tim!" cried Hughey, jerking the trunk lightly onto its end. "If you've been playing with us—"

"Playing!" ejaculated Tim, with a sniff of contempt. "There's something loose in your upper story, ain't there? Open it, Joe. The thing's locked yet, whatever's got out."

It did not take Joe Blizzard long to overcome the mystery of the lock. In less than a minute he had thrown back the lid of the trunk.

"Empty, by the horns of Moses!" he cried.

"Empty? And where's the stuff that made it so heavy?"

"And the noise I heard!" exclaimed Tim, suddenly. "It might have been a cough, or something like. Good gracious, could we have been played on? It's a decoy, as sure as you live. Spread yourselves, boys, there's somebody alive got out of that box."

His warning was instantly taken by the others, who ran quickly out of the door, Joe Blizzard hastily examining the closet and the window, and making his exit by the door through which Billy had gone.

But no Billy was there. He had melted away like a shadow, and left pure emptiness in his place.

Very few minutes sufficed to make a thorough search of the house, but nothing living was found in it, and the curses were both loud and deep with which this result was greeted.

"Like enough somebody is spying outside for us," suggested Joe. "Let's streak out, Tim, and scout up and down the street. We may smell out this rat."

"I'm afeared not," protested Tim, sourly. "This kind of rats have their holes handy. Howsoever, there ain't no harm trying."

They went out of the door together, leaving Hughey behind in the house.

Tim half-stumbled over a boy that was crouched down upon the door-steps, busily engaged in tying his shoe-string.

"You'd best git, you young rascal. What are you doing here?" he asked, testily.

"A feller in't doin' no harm tying his shoe or," retorted the boy, drawing the string into one of those boy's knots, which only a knife will open.

"Did you see anybody leaving this noose?" asked Joe, with a cursory glance at the boy.

"Yes, a slim sort of a ch.-p. He slipped out just now, as if he kinder wanted fresh air."

"Which way did he go?" asked Tim, curiously.

"Cross the street. Same which way after. I was busy tying my shoes."

"Oh, come on, Tim," exclaimed Joe. "No use wasting time on this ch.-p. You might as well try

to get blood out of a horse-chestnut. You take up the street. I will go down this way."

The boy paid no further attention to his questioners, seeming to think the tying of a good hard knot the first duty of life.

They had not got far, however, before he raised his head and looked keenly after them.

"Ain't it queer how folks will tumble over a gold mine at home, and go nosing away off for it?" he asked himself shrewdly. "If they'd seen me a square off they'd swore I was the Jack-in-a-box; but they never thought I'd be so risky as to squat down on their own door-step. You've got a young chap that calls himself Billy Baggage on your track, and if you shake him off easy I'll make my will and jump overboard, that's all."

And with his hands deep in his pockets, and whistling a defiant tune, Billy swaggered carelessly down the street.

CHAPTER X.

CHECKMATED.

It was with infinite unconcern that Billy Baggage walked along the street containing the house in which he had bagged his train-robbers.

Not for a minute did he let the doubtful mansion escape his close supervision. Not a fly could have left the house unseen. Billy chuckled silently to himself.

"I wonder what them galoots is up to?" he queried. "Maybe they're thinking over the sell, for they was sold cheap. And where the thunder is Tom Erskine? He promised to foller me as close as a rat's tail follers the rat; and there ain't the sign of a hair of him yit. Is that what he calls business? Why, if them chaps was to leave the house and scoot, I'd like to know how I'm goin' to keep 'em in sight! I can't split myself into three pieces and run three ways at once, nohow."

Billy looked down at himself as if to see whether such a feat was in any way possible, should it become necessary. He lifted his head again with a dubious shake.

"Tain't in the wood," he muttered. "And sure as you live there comes Tom Erskine now."

Billy moved nearer the house, as his friend, the express-agent, approached. The latter was accompanied by two or three other men.

"Hallo! Jack," he cried. "So you're out of your box. Up jumped the lid and out jumped Jack, hey?"

"Not much of a Jack in a box," returned Billy. "And where've you been? If I hadn't been smart as a steel-trap I mought have gone up into sassage-meat. And all a-waitin' on you."

"No matter, Billy boy. Late's better than never, you know. How about the game? Is it bagged?"

"You bet it is. Ain't I Billy Baggage, and ain't I runnin' this job? When I take a thing in hand it's put through, that's all. And there ain't no brag in me."

Tom looked at him intently for a minute, and then burst into a loud laugh.

"Crow away, my young rooster," he exclaimed, patting Billy approvingly on the shoulders. "Always do your crowing before you're picked, for there isn't much room for crowing afterward. And now where's this den?"

Billy scratched his head as if not quite liking the tone of his friend, and he mentally resolved that Tom Erskine should see that Billy Baggage was no braggart.

"This way!" he ordered, in a rather sharp tone. "That house with the white shutters. They are safe there, I know, for I tracked them back there fifteen minutes ago, just arter they'd done hunting fur me. And I know a fly ain't flew out of there since."

Tom and his companions followed their young leader, stopping in front of the suspicious house and viewing it with critical eyes.

"Looks decent and docile enough," remarked Tom. "And as quiet as if only an old maid and three cats lived there."

"The cats is there yet. And they've got claws, too," replied Billy.

"Ready, lads," commanded Tom. "And have your persuaders in hand. These fellows may show fight. Billy, just you shoot round to the back street. They may be slipping out back while we are sliding in front. And take care that the grass don't grow under your feet."

It was with a quick start that Billy received this warning, and his heart leaped as a sense of criminal remissness came upon him. The back door! Good heavens, there was a back door, and he had acted as if the front door was the only possible exit from a house!

He leaped away like a young colt shot round the corner of the block, and was speedily looking down the narrow and dark street that ran along the rear of the houses.

"Nobody there," said Billy, drawing a breath of satisfaction. "And Tom Erskine ain't got the sash on me yet. S'pose they had slid, and arter all 'ey blowin'! It would a' been jist terrible."

He leaned against the corner fence and waited with exemplary patience. Five-ten minutes passed, and nothing broke the calm of the scene. The street was deserted, not even a prowling cat varying the monotony of the prospect.

"I wonder if they've caught them—or been caught?" soliloquized Billy, as he uneasily shifted his position. "Them chaps is goin' to be hard coons to fool with, and Tom hadn't enough folks with him. Didn't like to tell him so, though, for he's one of that kind that knows too much for a boy to larn them anything. The only way with that kind is fur to let them go through the mill and find out for themselves."

Billy's remarks were brought to an abrupt termi-

nation by the sudden opening of a gate down the alley, and the appearance of several men, unrecognizable in the gathering gloom.

They looked right and left, and, after conversing for a minute, one of the men went to the right, while the others turned up the alley toward the young scoundrel.

The latter awaited them with no very comfortable feeling, for his quick eyes now recognized Tom Erskine. Could the robbers have given him the slip after all, and have escaped from the house while he was meandering about with his eyes on the front door?

"So! you're a 'cute young rat, you are," ejaculated Tom, as he came up. "Where's your game now?"

"Weren't they in the house?" asked Billy, rather timidly.

"In the house? Thunder! There was nothing in it but an empty trunk. It is a regular decoy house, rented for this job. You wouldn't find a hair from its last cat's tail inside its walls. They didn't come out since you've been here?"

"No," replied Billy.

"Then they came out before, and have given you the slip as clean as if you'd never seen the back door of a house. I'm ashamed of you, Billy Baggage."

"Good gracious!" cried Billy, in a tone of vexation, "you don't speck a feller to have his eyes a mile apart at the same time? My eyes ain't that double-barreled, patent gum-elastic kind that kin see round corners, or shoot straight through a brick wall. Hope you ain't arter buying me fur a torpedo or a forty-horse-power telescope."

"Oh! dry up, Billy," responded Tom. "You know you were sold; and sold bad. And after all your bragging, too. Well, we've got to try and chase up these thieves, and I suppose you can be of some use in that job, at least."

"Not much," exclaimed Billy, planting himself sturdily. "You're so blamed smart, and I'm so blamed dumb, that I'm kinder astard I might spile everything. So I guess I'll let you paddle your own canoe."

And Billy meant it, for he was off like a shot as soon as he had delivered himself of this decided answer. Tom looked after him in surprise as he ran hastily along the street, disappearing in a minute around an adjacent corner.

Billy kept on without a pause until he had reached the vicinity of the railroad. He made his way in this direction almost without intention, by a sort of intuition, or an attractive influence in the rails.

The puff of an engine came welcome to his ears as he neared the road. A train rolled into view, slowly gathering headway as it steamed onward from the depot. It was the afternoon eastward express, which had stopped for water.

The short winter twilight was now nearly gone, and the lights from the train shone out invitingly into the gathering gloom.

With an alertness born of long practice the boy caught the hand-rail of a car and swung himself onto the steps, though the train was now gaining dangerous speed.

There was a shame-faced look on his face as he went through the cars. The passengers locked up as he passed, but he had no eyes for the right or the left; straight onward only went his view. In this self-absorbed way he passed through two or three cars, which were comfortably filled with passengers. He finally made his way into the Palace-car. There were several people seated near the end at which he entered, but the other end of the car seemed deserted. Without even noticing the nod of recognition of the car attendant he made his way forward, and sunk down into one of these empty seats, near a curtained compartment.

There was more of a settled gloom on Billy's face than often made its appearance on the wide-awake features.

"If I ain't gone off cheep, there's no tricks," he muttered. "If I'd been put up at a Chap John's auction, and brok'd down to the fist bidder, I couldn't have sold cheaper. And after my crowin', and trappin', and leavin' it to myself to slow off afore Tom Erskine. It ain't jist the worst of it. If I hadn't bragged I wouldn't be a farctor. And we had the robbers in sich a laud I not, too! I couldn't stop much to swap jobs with Lutch Bens, fur I'm only fit to peddle plants."

Billy's mental soliloquy was broken into by the tones of voices which came to his ear from the compartment close to which he sat.

His attention was arrested by something familiar in the voices, and he listened to try if he could recognize the speakers.

"Some decisive measures must be taken," spoke a rather perious voice. "It will never do for this state of things to continue. Do you think the detectives are alert?"

"Oh! yes, but they have not got on the right track yet. However, we have somethin' which may prove a clew, if it pans out right."

"That's Mr. Perkins," said Billy, to himself. "I know the ether, too, if I could only catch him."

"What is it?" asked the decided voice.

"There was a decoy truck taken on the mail train, which has gone through, just ahead of us. Instead of clothing it contained a young chap that you may know—a fellow cute enough to smell out the gang if he gets half a chance."

"Is it not a dangerous experiment for the boy?"

"I think not, with this fellow."

"Who is he?"

"We call him Billy Baggage. He is as smart as a monkey. One of that kind of India-rubber boys whose neck can't be broken."

Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.

"I know him," replied the other speaker. "He is sharp and wide-awake."

"Yea, as wide-awake as a donkey injinal!" cried a loud, querulous voice near them. "There ain't no use buttering up Billy Baggage, for he's sold out at a cheap auction, and ain't bring his worth in salt. So you best cut him outer your books, Colonel Scott."

"Who is this?" exclaimed the colonel, starting up and looking out of the door of the alcove.

"I'm that identical individual, Billy Baggage," said the boy. "I twigg'd the rascals, but they flung me, and I've got nothin' more to say. But if anybody catches me crown' ag'in I hope they'll serve me like they would a sassy, half-grown little chicken, that's all."

Without waiting for answer or comment Billy ran hastily from the car, leaving his two auditors lost in surprise.

CHAPTER XI.

A LOVERS' QUARREL.

"I COULD NOT ANSWER, SIR; PARTICULARLY AS I NEVER RECEIVED THE LETTER IN QUESTION."

The speaker, Claire Hamilton, stood with her hand resting on the top of a low stone wall beside which she stood, her slender, shapely form drawn up erect, and her eyes looking straight forward, with a steady, unflinching gaze.

But it was not the broad landscape which stretched out for miles before her, the long, low valley filled with a winter mist, on which her eyes rested. It was something of more vital moment which had called the flush to her cheek.

George Howard, for it was he to whom she spoke, clutched tightly the cane which he held, his eyes fixed on the lines which he was nervously drawing in the ground at his feet.

He lifted his head and darted a quick, straight glance at her as she spoke.

"You are growing rather formal, Claire," he said.

"Yes," she replied, in an indifferent, tired voice, her eyes turning to gaze down the valley.

"And why? If I am privileged to ask." There was repressed anger in his tone.

"You should know; without demanding explanation," she replied. "I hardly think my meaning can be any mystery to you."

"That may be as it may," he quickly returned. "I certainly am not asking too much, and must repeat my request."

It seemed, from their tones, and the color in their faces, that there was a quarrel rapidly brewing between the two former lovers.

"Which I shall not answer, sir," she hotly replied. "It is enough that I have been mistaken in you. I think those words will convey to you what I mean, without further parley. What I have been told in relation to your associations is, and shall be, a secret with me; but it stands in the way of our free intercourse."

"My associations!" he exclaimed, sharply and bitterly. "Who dares malign me?"

"Are you falsely maligned?" Her eyes were bent upon him with an earnest, almost pleading glance, as if she was mentally praying for him to clear himself from the stain of her imputations.

"I do not propose to argue my case before a court in which you are both judge and prosecutor," he harshly answered. "You have no right to speak to me in such a tone."

"Say that it is all false! Prove to me that it is all false; if only by your word! God knows I am loth to believe it all."

Her voice vibrated with intense feeling. Her hand, which had rested on the wall, was extended appealingly toward him.

"Believe what, Claire? You forget that you have left me, as yet, wandering in the dark."

There was a quick, nervous quiver of her lip, as she looked into his stern face.

"It is this," she hastily cried, her hand seeking her pocket. "I have had reason, abundant reason, to distrust you, George. This will explain what I do not care to put into words; even to you."

She had extracted a letter from her pocket, her hand shaking nervously as she presented it to him. It was a much crumpled and not overly clean document, the writing on which seemed of the decided perpendicular and gigantic order. It looked like the effort of a school-boy, who had not yet got deep into the mysteries of written language.

Billy curled proudly as he gazed at the uninviting epistle.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Read it," she replied, resting her hand again on the wall, as if for needed support.

With a voice that grew colder and sterner as he read, he proceeded to peruse the letter.

We give it to the reader in a verbatim copy:

"PHILADELPHIA, Jan'ry 20, 1877.

"MY DARE MISS CLARE: I'd writ afore only I hadn't nothin' to write about. I don't want ter put beans in yer coffee now, but it must be did. I don't like ter have that feller goin' on a-courtin' of you, Miss Clare, when he's all I said an' wusa. I hope you 'n't forgot what I told you 'bout him afore, 'cause it's gospel, every word. I know what it is when a gal gets hold of a lover, fur I've been there. That's to say somebody else's been the gal, an' I've been the lover. But there's places where we've got to stick pins in, no matter how much anybody hollers!"

"And it's what I'm wantin' to tell yer, now, is how me and Tom Erskine, of the Adams Exp., cooked up a dodge to nail them trunk robbers, that was layin' hob on the road. I ain't got room now, to tell you the whole game, nor how they gin me the air, but I got my eyes on them, and that's wuss than runnis' a two-inch auger in a pine plank."

"And who do you think they was? Why, just them cronies of George Howard that he's as thick with bees in a molasses barrel, and that I've seen him a-talkin' to, often. Particular, was that low-born chap that wears his hat on three hairs, and puts on a rig as if he owned the Continental. I want ter do the square thing by you, Miss Clare, as long's you've been such a friend to me, and I wouldn't say a letter, let alone a word, ag'in' George Howard fer a gold mine, just to hurt yer feelin's, only I know it's a blamed shame for you ter have yer eyes shut up by any horse-fly like that."

"That's nutt'n said. I'll post you in the whole business the first time I git up your way. Till then just keep an eye open fur that chap, and don't let him, bux in yer ear that hoss-chestnuts is just cousin to peanuts. Yours, respectively,

"WILLIE BAGGAGE."

Howard's tone grew colder and harsher as he read this inviting epistle. As he finished it, he dropped from his hand, and he turned to Claire with his sternest expression of countenance.

Her hand now clutched at the hard stone on which it rested, and her color came and went as she watched with intent look his expression.

"So, this is the head and front of my offending! This!" and he spurned the fallen letter with his foot. "If I stand condemned on the strength of such a precious document as that—Pshaw! to think of the fastidious Claire Hamilton having such a correspondent, and presenting me this farago as evidence of Heaven knows what! It seems to me that this interview has been unnecessarily prolonged, and you will not object to my bidding you good-day."

She made no sign in response to his ceremonious bow, but her eyes continued to follow him as he walked with a stern tread up the road, never once turning until he had disappeared around a curve.

Then she snatched up the fallen letter and crushed it in her nervous grasp.

"Not for one instant has he denied it," she exclaimed, in a tone full of pain. "He dare not! It is all too true. As for this—I should not have shown him this. I did not dream of how ridiculous it would sound, taken by itself." As she spoke she slowly tore the letter into shreds. "It is other evidence that has taught me what he is—and what his manner but confirms. And yet—I loved him!—I loved him! despicable as he has been to win my love, with his base record."

Her voice had risen almost into a wail. Starting suddenly she flung the shreds of the torn letter in a white cloud upon the air, and walked with a quick, uneven step along the frozen path.

She was high up upon a road which wound upward still unto a wooded crest, while her path led downward toward the valley. A hundred yards up the slope stood the white stuccoed house at which she had been visiting. There was no other habitation visible until the road entered the mist shrouded valley.

She had traversed it a hundred times before. Every foot of it was familiar to her feet. Yet never with such feelings as now stirred in her breast, never with such a hot pain in her brow, had she pursued that downward road.

At the turn before her the road reached the lower level, by which it was a mile or more to her home. Yet she was not destined to reach it unmolested. A peculiar voice caused her to raise her eyes. Before her stood three men, eying her with looks that were not very reassuring.

"Excuse me, miss," said the one whose voice had aroused her, "but maybe you can tell us how far it is from here to Bryn Mawr?"

She looked distrustfully at the smartly-dressed, vulgar-faced speaker.

"I do not know the exact distance," she replied. "But any one around here can tell you."

She would have walked on, but one of the three, a black-whiskered, large-built man, stood directly in her way.

"That ain't altogether a civil answer, young woman," he said, harshly. "And it ain't the kind of an answer that we're going to be put off with."

Claire was growing alarmed. She looked with a frightened glance about her.

"But indeed I do not know," she faltered; "or I would be glad to tell you."

"It ain't Bryn Mawr, it's Hestonville we want," replied the third man. "Spose you post us where that is."

"I believe Hestonville is just this side of the city," she answered, essaying to move on. But the large man stood humorously in her path.

"I don't see any occasion for any such hurry," he protested, with a hoarse laugh. "And we've got some more questions to ask you yet."

She stood looking at them like a startled bird. Suddenly something in the appearance of the formally-dressed man gave her a new idea, recalling some of Billy Baggage's descriptions. She spoke quickly and impulsively:

"I know you now! I have heard of you! You are George Howard's confederates!"

An odd glance passed between the three men, and the large one burst into a coarse laugh.

"We have heard of him a few young women," he confessed; "and he is a ne'er-do-well chap, and a man of his word. Eh! Joe?"

"One of us, sure enough. She's hit it there," responded Joe Blizzard, for it was he, looking with an amused expression at the others. "I knew George had a lady friend somewhere hereabouts. He's told me about it himself. But never in a bragging way. Oh! no, George's a gentleman."

"And we don't want to detain you, young woman, but we want a keepsake to remember you by," spoke the large man.

"A trifle of a gold chain would suit me," remarked the third.

Claire was too overcome with this confirmation of her doubts about George Howard to heed what they were saying. She attempted to walk on, but her arm was seized by Joe Blizzard, who exclaimed:

"Come, madam, not so fast! We can't get along without the time, and will have to borrow your watch."

But, Claire had caught what had not yet reached their ears—the sound of hoofs beyond the turn of the road. A loud call for help broke from her trembling lips.

The three men started and looked at each other as a voice answered her call, and the quick tramp of a horse was now plainly audible. They drew together, as if prepared to show fight.

The next instant the horse turned the curve. A cry of glad recognition broke from Claire's lips as she saw the rider. It was the gentleman who had accompanied Adam Clark in the pursuit of the runaway sleigh, and who had driven her back while Clark rode on in chase of the wreckers.

The gentleman tightened his rein as he came up, his eyes glancing inquiringly at the scene before him.

"Miss Hamilton!" he cried, in surprise.

"I am threatened by these villains," she replied. "They were about to rob me."

The peculiarly stern look of the gentleman rested upon them. They shrank as if abashed by his gaze, which was full of command.

"Begone!" he cried, his hand in his pocket, as if finding for a weapon.

Though his opponents were three to one they seemed in some way awed by his manner. They turned and walked up the road, leaving him alone with Claire.

"Do not leave me, Mr. Jordan!" she exclaimed, as he seemed about to ride on in pursuit.

"Not until I see you safely home," he responded, springing from his horse, and giving her his hand, "though I would have liked to punish those rascals."

CHAPTER XII.

A HOME CONFERENCE.

BILLY BAGGAGE sat in the shadows of the paternal mansion; instinctively, however, seeking what shreds of sunshine came through the wonderfully patched window.

"There ain't no use put'ing lights in," his mother would say, despairingly, "for pop will keep bursting them out again, and chopping up his hands into the bargain. He can't cut his knuckles on an old hat that's some comfort."

Billy sat on a low stool, in the center of this mosaic of sunlight and shadow, his chin resting on his two hands as he looked up reflectively into the face of his paternal relative.

Mr. Baggage, Sr., as usual, occupied a chair with only three sound legs, and kept himself in a state of nervous delirium trying to preserve its equilibrium. There were chairs in the house which could be kept standing without a gymnastic performance, but the more Mr. Baggage became incapable of keeping his own feet, the more perversely he insisted on using this chair and making it keep its feet.

"Dunno how 'tis," he said, determinedly, shutting his eyes to the situation, "that cheer is built so rickety nowadays. When I was a young splint like you, Billy, there weren't no upset to the cheers they made in them days. Bu' it'd take a circus actor—" The remainder of his remark was lost through a sudden lurch in the chair, which jerked the last remnant of his logic out of him.

"Why don't you take a chair that's got four legs?" asked Mrs. Baggage, spitefully.

"Cause this cheer was in the family afore you was born, Mrs. Baggage," was the dignified answer.

"I come over with old Billy Penn, in the Mayflower, and I'll never go back on it, if it gits down to one leg and nary a back. We old fam'lies, Mrs. Baggage—of which you ain't one—don't never like to give up on hairlooms."

"But that's gitting off the subject, pop," remarked Billy, as his father went through another series of acrobatic efforts. "You was a-goin' to tell me all about that bizness down to Joe Danglies."

"And what's more," retorted the mother, "it ain't five minutes since you said this was one of the rickety chairs that are built nowadays."

"Goodness gracious! women, I was only talkin' in the abstract," returned Mr. Baggage, with a burst of impatience. "But there ain't no use wastin' logic on wimmen, and that I've known many a day."

"A person might think you'd just found it out, and wasn't quite sure of it yet," replied his wife, bound to have the last word, "or you'd save it for smarter company; such as the folks you meet at old Dan's."

Mr. Baggage rocked to and fro in his chair, as he looked the con'empt that was too deep for speech.

"Yes, Billy," he remarked, reverting to another subject, "as I was sayin', they guy me a hint to go."

"What kind of a hint, pop?"

"A mighty convincing one," responded Jacob, rubbing his back reflectively. "Anyhow, I got down-stairs 'thout walkin' down, nor slidin' down the banisters. And I'm half afear'd there was some boots mixed up in the bizness."

"Kicked Jawn, hey?" asked Billy, with a laugh that was not very reverent. "Who was these chaps, Pop?"

"Mostly railroaders. Fellers that talked Ruthin—but brakes, switches, and paddlin' her through, and coolin' up. But the booses among 'em was a diff'rent sort of chapees."

"Ah!" returned Billy, looking up inquiringly. "What sort of sellers?"

"That French sort, Billy, that split thunder 'bout Paris," replied his father, recovering from a dangerous lurch of his chair. "Them Communists, or Internationalists; reg'lar git-up-and-git sort of rake-over-the-coals geniuses."

"And what was the game?" asked Billy. "Gearing up a strike ag'in' the Pennsy, I s'pose?" "I guess that's what bring the railroaders," said his father, pulling his hair reflectively. "The other uns wanted bread 'bout work, and cabbagers 'bout plowin', and a plug in the head fur every coon that didn't think jist what they thukk."

"I've heard them talk," remarked Billy. "It's mighty goo' logic fur the feller that's got an empty pocket and don't enjoy work. But it not fur 'ristocrats like me and you, pop. And what are they goin' to do ag'in' the Pennsy? that's what I want to git at."

"I went down-stairs afore they cum to that p'int, Billy," replied Jacob, straightening up in his chair. "I allers think it best not to wait after gettin' a hint to go. But they ain't flung me yet. If I can't lead I can foller."

"There's somethin' more a-comin' then, pop?" inquired Billy, catching the creaking chair. "You've see'd more than you've been a-tellin'?"

"I've see'd them Internationalists, and I've folered them," returned Jacob, with drunken gravity. "I was down to Tim Lenning's. You dunno where Tim's is, Billy?"

"Does he sell strychnine?" asked Billy.

"Imported wines and lickers," corrected his father. "A 1; old Oldard, Cognac, and 41 Bourbon. None of your common swill. I stopped in there to wet my whistle. I'd been a-walkin', you see, and got baked in the throat."

"I'd allers ride, arter this, if I was you, pop," remarked Billy, "then you won't git baked in the throat."

"Looked here, boy," cried Jacob, in a sharp tone. "Don't you be a-dictatin' to your father. That ain't the respect!"

Down went the swaying chair, and Jacob slowly crawled out from under the William Penn relic. He jammed his hat fiercely on his head, and stood eying askance, the fallen antique.

"Durn the cheer," he ejaculated at length. "I never seen a cheer that'd go down as easy as that does. And it cum over in the Mayflower, too. No body d' a' thought it."

With infinite caution he righted the decrepit seat, and again trusted himself to its thrilling uncertainty.

"But, how 'bout Tom Lenning's, pop?" asked Billy, who had witnessed this episode without even removing his chin from his hands.

Similar shipwrecks had happened too often to create any alarm in the Baggage domicile.

"Well, as I said, I was just lubricatin' with a drop of old rye, when in sailed one of them Communists. I knowed him as quick as a crow knows a cornfield. He didn't imbibe at the bar, but just slid on. Afore ten minutes there was four more of them slid somewhere inside. Then there slid in a jug of ale. Then I knowed there was deviltry."

"How did you know that?"

"'Cause they didn't drink whisky. Your thin malt stuff ain't got no fun in it, and so it must mean devility."

"Anything else, pop?" asked Billy.

"Well, I was kinder cur'us, you mought think, Billy. Mo and the bartender is old chums, but he was just as close-mouthed as an oyster; and so I know'd there was somethin' up. Surface it to say, Billy, I got into the house 'bout them suspected, and I nailed 'em in an up-stairs room, with one winder and one keyhole."

Billy laughed at this arithmetical climax, and at the perilous see-sawing of the chair which kept time to it.

"What's to pay, pop?" he asked.

"Old Sam's to pay," was the reply. "I heered them plain; and see'd them, too. It's a reg'lar plot they've rigged up. Jist you wait till nex' summer, and if you don't see double-barreled thunder and lightnin' on the railroads, then my head ain't worth thucks."

"Dive in. Let's have the purticklears."

"Ain't none," said Mr. Baggage, mysteriously. "You won't blab, Billy?"

"Did I ever blab?" asked Billy, indignantly.

"Now don't you git on your ear," remarked the father, bringing his waltzing chair to a halt. "There's a whole beehive full of them Communists, that's enough. And jist now the railroads are their clover-field. They're down on train-robbers; that ain't their game. Their game's to smash up, and wreck, and splice. The railroads is got to put up wages or be bu'sted. And what's more, they're workin' up the injineers and brake-men, and all the railroaders; and if there ain't a squarely bu'st-up afore anybody smells it, then there's no use gabblin'."

"Jist you mind that, pop, and don't be gabblin'," remarked Billy, impressively. "Them's dangerous cusses to blow about. Let's mo and you and mom salt it down and keer it shady."

"That's sensible, Billy," exclaimed "mom," from among her pants.

"Do they meet there reg'lar?" asked Billy.

"Mum's the word," replied Jacob, a little offended. "And what's more, I made a narre miss from getting another hint to travel down-stairs; so I concluded not to wait."

"All right, pop! There's some fun afloat anyhow, and if there's any new hand to be dealt out in the game I'm a-goin' to try and git one of them. We'll try and make a cutthroat game out of it."

"Take keer it ain't your throat that's cut," warned his father.

"Jist give me enough trumps; and I hold some good ones now," replied Billy. "Ain't quite ready to bet on my hand yet though."

Down went the hair at this juncture, and down went Jacob. Up came Jacob, and away slid the chair, propelled by a vigorous kick.

"Durn the old cheer anyhow! I don't b'lieve it come in the Mayflower," he muttered.

CHAPTER XIII. SECRET CONCLAVE.

We will pass over the adventures of Billy for the next ten days, though they were days in which his time off the road was well filled with occupation, preferring to let him tell in his own manner the story of his doings during this period of time.

We now find him in the handsomely-appointed private office of Colonel Scott, to which the plea of important business had admitted him, together with his coadjutor, the gum-drop boy, Hans Breitmann.

Billy is seated in a luxurious easy-chair, facing the colonel, who has somewhat impatiently dropped his pen to hear what the boy has to say. Hans, on the contrary, has stationed himself in a remote corner, on the extreme edge of an office stool, to which he clinging with the air of one doing penance for a multitude of sins.

Billy's hat is held in his left hand, and he lays the two fingers of his right hand on it in a very impressive way, as emphasis to every important point made, while there is something imitable in the sparkle of his eyes.

"The hull thing jist lays in a nutshell, kurnel," he remarks. "And I'm the boy that's in fer crackin' the nut."

"If you do I don't want you to bring me anything but the kernel," replied the railroad president.

"All right. I'll try and shell it out," returned Billy.

"Have you anything to shell out just now?"

"In course; or I wouldn't be here. You see, me and Dutch Hans—where's that boy, Hans?" and Billy twisted round on his seat to look for his friend.

"Now you yust talk on," came in a loud whisper from the wall. "Don't you mint Hans."

"Correck, old wall bugger. Jist you keep dozy; and don't put in till I ax you... Well, as I was sayin', kurnel—"

"Come, come, my boy," commanded the colonel, good-naturedly. "You move on too slowly. Let's to the pith of the matter at once."

"Well, then, we've jist holded the biggest nest of wasps you ever see'd, mo and Hans. Ain't that so, Hans?"

"Yaw," came in guttural tones from the Dutch boy.

"A set of them—what-do-you-call-them? That sort of chaps that kicked up such a hubbub in Paris arter the Germans lanboosted the French."

"What, the Communists?"

"Yes, the Communists; that's them. Jist a nest full. And they was a goin' to play Hail Columby with the old Pennsy. Hey, Hans?"

"Dat was yust so," returned Hans.

"Pshaw! the vaporings of such men are of small matter to me, if that is all you have to tell," said Colonel Scott, impatiently.

"You can't ride a horse, kurnel, till you git on it," replied Billy, with a shrewd look. "And when a feller's got a skittish animalie he's got to mount keerful."

"You are safe on now, at all events," remarked the colonel, laughing. "So touch up your racer to his best paces."

"He ain't no fast trotter; but he's a sure one, and that's better," continued Billy, without a particle of hurry in his tone. "You know, kurnel, there's been thieving, and robbing, and sich work on the road lately; and tryin' to bu'st trains into splinters, and all that. I've been mixed up in it a bit myself."

"I know, tha's, my boy."

"I've been chopped into sausage-meat; and run away with by a gal in a sleigh; and I yanked off for dry-goods, in a trunk; and generally used us if I'd been bought and sold. And Hans knows it."

"Yaw," proceeded from the Dutch boy's corner.

"And how about the three men who slipped out of the back door while you was watching the front?" asked the colonel, smiling.

"Oh! that was 'cause I didn't have double-barreled eyes, and couldn't see through the back of my head," replied Billy, in an off-hand way, though his face grew very red. "I put your hounds on the track, anyway. I don't hear that they cotched them."

"Not yet," said the colonel. "Would you know them, if you should see them again?"

"Like a boss knows oats."

"Then keep an eye open, my boy. There's one of them in particular, the man they call Blizzard—would you know him?"

"Like a pig knows corn."

"He is a dangerous man. It is important that he should be arrested. If you should see him, Bi-ly—"

"Nuff said," interrupted Billy, laying his finger very impressively along his nose. "A nod's as good as a wink to a blind mule. You've said the word, and Joe Blizzard's my game. He won't shake me easy."

"Don't talk of this."

"Mum's the word," rejoined Billy. "You hear that, Hans? What's the word?"

"Mum," replied Hans, in a stage whisper.

"That's as safe as if it was dead and buried," continued Billy. "But you ain't hit the worst egg in the lot, yit, kurnel."

"Ah!" replied the colonel, quickly. "Who is this worst?"

"It's the chap that's called George Howard. I dunno if you've heered of him afore or not, but I've

been a-watching him like a hawk watches a hen. He makes all the pistol-bal's that these other fellers shoot. If you want to bring down the hull o' boddle, jist nab the bottom chap. Like Samson grabbed the pillars, you know, and brought down the hull sten' circus on the heads of the Filibusters—a pose you've read it!"

"Yes. And I know of George Howard," replied Colonel Scott, with an odd smile. "His turn will come yet. For the present I am not quite ready to deal with him."

"Tell you what it is, kurnel, you don't know it all," responded Billy, with great earnestness. "Do you know he's been talkin' love, like I'll possessed, to jist the sweetest, purest, nicest gal that ever growed in Chester valley? And, what's more, she's swallered it all like a hungry Irishman swallered Lot roast 'tafers."

"I didn't imagine things were so bad as that," replied the smiling colonel.

"It was wuss than that. I'm drawin' it mild," returned Billy. "Howsomever, I've been buzzin' in her ear, and I guess I've put peas in his shoes in them diggings. Bet he don't find it sich comfortable walkin'."

"Take care, Billy, my boy," warned the colonel, with a cheering laugh. "It's a dangerous step to step between lovers."

"I guess there won't be no breaking hearts," replied Billy. "The gal couldn't been so deep in love with him, for I notice there's sweetmeats between her and another six-footer. She looked at him as if she thought he was lump of sugar; and he looked at her as if he thought she was beeswax and honey. Weren't that so, Hans? You see'd it all."

"Yaw," replied Hans. "Yust so, dat was. Yust like a Dutchman lu' gum-drops."

"Can you describe him?" asked the colonel.

"Six foot. Broad shoulders. Black whiskers. Handsome as a pictur. Kind of fierce-lookin', too, when he ain't blinkin' at the gals."

"His name?" inquired Colonel Scott.

"I heerd his name, but it's slipped out somehow through the top of my head. You cotched it, Hans."

"Shack Shorton," said Hans, in a decided tone.

"What's that?" cried the colonel, quickly. "Shack Shortone?"

"No, no," laughed Billy. "Hans git too much Dutch into his English. His talk's like slanjacks and sauerkraut mixed. The name's Jack Jordan—or John Jordan."

Colonel Scott made no reply, but sat for a minute with his face restin' on his hand, in a musing attitude. Billy watched him keenly, but failed to detect what was passing in that active brain. He looked up suddenly, after a moment's thought, saying:

"And now about these Communists, Billy?"

"The've been holdin' meetin's, kurnel, along with railroad folks, tryin' to raise trouble on the road, and git up a strike."

"That's no secret to me, boy."

"S'pose not," retorted Billy. "But there's rivers that runs atop the ground, and there's rivers that runs underground. There's meetin's that ain't fur railroaders to git into, but that smart young coons like me and Hans gits invited to. Hey, Hans?"

"Yaw," replied Hans, half-slipping off his perch.

"Of course we was inside a closet. We was afraid, you know, that they mought feel ashamed to talk plain afore us. Some folks are kind of backward."

"Come to the point, boy," said the colonel, with quick decision of tone. "Who were these men? Had you seen them before?"

"There was only four of them; and they was the inside ring of all these Communists. They had black masks on so we couldn't see their faces. But if one of them wasn't George Howard then I'm not goin' to trust my eyes to 'em."

"Ha! You are sure of that?" Did you overhear them?"

"It was the coldest-blooded bizzness you ever heerd, kurnel," replied Billy, with prea' impressiveness. "You'll hear from them soon, sur, for you're to be noticed that the wages of the men must be put up instanter, if not sooner."

"And what's to happen if they ain't?"

"There's to be the biggest strike that was ever heerd of engineered in these parts, fur on'ting."

"And what else?"

"There's to be train smashin', and bridge wreckin' and everlastin' thunder generally. You'll git it all, well spiced, in their leter. Iain't no trug'g neither. There's a big gang of them, and they're to buzzin' the railroad folks now, and—"

"You remember their place of meeting?"

"How's tha', Hans, hey?"

"Yaw, yes, spec' so."

"Jist like a book, kurnel."

"Was there anything more?"

"Only that they're down on robbers, and all that sort of critters. Tain't plunder they want. It's the rights of man, that's what they kept saying."

"Very well," said the colonel, shortly. "I want that man Blizzard, remember that, Billy. If you see him don't let him escape your eyes. John!"

"Yes, sir," said his doorkeeper, entering.

"Show these boys out."

Billy followed as if he thought this dismissal was rather curt; and Hans as if it was a welcome relief.

CHAPTER XIV.

TRACKING JOE.

It was the mail train west from Philadelphia. February was now far advanced, and the extreme cold of the early winter was exchanged for mild springlike weather. During the previous night, however, a light sprinkle of snow had fallen, and a thin white coating lay but half concealed.

Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.

darker surface. The sky was overcast, with clouds that promised more snow ere the day should pass.

Tom Erskine had been shifted to the express car on this train, and Billy Baggage and his friend Hans found it convenient, for reasons of their own, to travel to-day by the same line. They were in Tom's car, and a very interesting conversation had sprung up between the three.

"When I called on the kurnel—Kurnel Scott I mean. Hin and me's as thick as bean soup—he'd sent me a letter, you know, requestin' interview."

"I know I'll burst your head open and let out the rest of the lies all in heap, if you don't steer n'er the truth," roared Tom. "Do you think you're talkin' to a Bucks county farmer?"

"Look here, Hans, didn't I show you the letter?" asserted Billy, excitedly.

"Nein," said Hans, shaking his head.

"Ninel! What's ninet? I didn't ax you anything bout figgers."

"Nix. No. Dat's how," replied Hans. "Nein means nix."

"And you're goin' back on me," said Billy, mournfully. "Me that l'arnt you all you know—and ain't likely to git much credit fur it, neither. If I only had you out of the car I'd punch your head, sure as your name's Hans."

"Oh come, Billy. Drop the interview business," cried Tom. "What's in the wind, anyhow?"

"Only that there's a party of pirates that's goin' to run the Pennsy on their own hook," replied Billy. "They've writ the kurnel, and if he don't raise wages straight off there'll be everlastin' thunder and brimestone lightnin' afoot. Them's the Rights-of-Men chaps. They're puttin' all sorts of confisticated nonsense in the men's heads, and gittin' up just the biggest strike out."

"How do you know all this?"

"The kurnel told—That's to say," continued Billy, noticing Tom's belligerent look, "that it's all so. And there's to be train-smashin', and a row all round."

"I don't know how you came by all this, Billy," said Tom, seriously, "but it looks as if there was something in it. There have been three attempts made to filing trains from the track inside of the last three weeks."

"And nobody knows who's a-doin' it," interpolated Billy.

"It is all a mystery."

"I'll tell you, then," continued Billy, very solemnly. "It's all them Communists. They're makin' the brakemen and road hands b'lieve that no bread at all is better than half a loaf; and if the kurnel don't knuckle down there'll be ructions out."

"Der kurnel won't. He's nix vool, der kurnel," remarked Hans, impressively.

"Nary knuckle," asserted Billy.

"I wonder if the chaps that carried you off in the trunk belong to the same gang?" said Tom.

"No," rep'd Billy.

"How do you know that?"

"Cause they're train-robbers. Thieves. None of your high-toned Rights-of-Men fellers. Tain't plumb these chaps is arter. I'll say that fur them. They're a 'ristocratic set of troublesome scallawags, them fellers."

"Have you kept your eyes open, Billy?" asked Tom, laughing. "You said you would know your three trunk-porters. What's the report?"

"Know them? You kin bet on that. I'd know Joe Blizzard anyhow, if I coched him with red eye brows and a half-hitch in his nose. He's so mighty dandified, you know. Ain't seen 'em yet."

"Nein," corroborated Hans.

"Look here, Dutch!" cried Billy, angrily. "I'll knock nine teeth down your throat if you don't quit a-sayin' that. Do you s'pose we gentlemen ain't got no nerves?"

"That's good Dutch, Billy," said Tom.

"I don't keer. Nobody's got no right sputtin' Dutch this side the ocean. That's one of the diff'kilties I posed them emigrated from. The idea of ships sailin' across the seas just to fetch High Dutch over. When there's plenty of good English about too. It's wuss than castor oil."

"Do you know what he is talking about, Hans?" asked Tom, mischievously.

"Nein," replied Hans, with his stupid look.

"Of course he don't," asserted Billy. "Come a way, Hans. He'll have us a-fightin' next, and that won't be good fur your nerves."

"Yaw. Dat's goot," cried Hans, with a laugh, as if he had caught the point of a most stupendous joke.

Tom Erskine laughed too, as the boys left the car together.

"One of them is as bright as a woodpecker and the other as stupid as an owl," he remarked. "It's a wonder to me that two such boys sail in one boat. Billy Baggage is bound to make his way yet."

Billy was making his way—toward the rear end of the train, followed lumberingly by Hans. Our hero's eyes, always alert, seemed particularly so this morning, as he passed by the lines of seated passengers, not letting a face escape his quick scrutiny.

They reached the rear end just as the train came to a halt. Billy coiled himself into an unoccupied seat, followed by Hans, who noticed a peculiar smile on the lips and sparkle in the eyes of his silent friend.

Not until the train had got well under way again did Billy speak, as if he wanted the noise of the wheels to drown his voice from the other passengers.

"Did you see, Hans?" he asked, in a low, eager tone.

"Yaw," replied Hans.

"What?" asked Billy, incredulously.

"Tutech vrows and one Tutech baby."

"Jist so," admitted Billy, laughing at his own superior acumen. "And I seen wuss than that. I seen Joe Blizzard."

"Oh, nein!" replied Hans, in astonishment.

"You might think so," continued Billy, "the way he was manufactured. Charcoaled eyebrows, and whiskers set out with porticoes. A wig as black as a crow's wing, and a big patch across his nose. And what was wuss, the seediest-lookin' concern you ever see'd. That was the biggest disguise out. It's a wonder I knowned the bird with his fine feathers picked."

"Dat can't be—sure," said Hans, incredulously. "Tain't Sho Blizzard, I pet. Maybe you ain't so smart as you t'inks, Pilly."

"I'd know him if he was rolled down hill in a tar barrel," replied Billy. "And what's more, Hans," here his voice dropped to a whisper, "there was three of them French 'Rights-of-Man' cusses in the same car."

"Dem we seen from der closet?"

"Jist that crowd. I know them like I know pumpkins."

"Don't p'lieve it nix," declared Hans.

"Don't, hey? Then foller me, hot foot, that's all. I'll pinch you, or stick a pin in you, when I want you to look."

"Ter look will pe for your head. And feel too," returned Hans. "Don't mooch like pins, dat way."

"Oh! come on, and dry up. Pine won't hurt if you don't jerk backward. March ahead, Hans, and look alive when I give you the signal."

"Not der pin," protested Hans.

"I'll jist pull your hair then; or pinch your ear. That won't hurt, you know."

With a rueful look Hans passed on through the car, hardly liking to trust to the tender mercies of Billy Baggage, yet not venturing to resist the orders of that imperious youth.

Entering the next car in advance Hans felt a slight pull upon his long locks.

"Now look alive!" came in a loud whisper at his ear. "The French chaps are in them middle seats, and Joe Blizzard near the front end."

Hans used his eyes with all the scrutinizing of which he was capable, but failed to recognize any familiar face. He would have stopped near the front of the car, but received a hint from Billy to keep on. Reaching the outer platform he turned back, saying:

"Ter tiffel! I don't knows nix chap in ter car."

He just then caught sight of as crestfallen a visage as it had often been his lot to see. Billy Baggage, for once in his life, seemed utterly nonplussed.

"They couldn't have sunk through the floor, or dried up and blowed out the car windors," he ejaculated.

"In ter nex' car, maybe," suggested Hans. "Dat's what I d'iks."

"Thunder, Dutchy, we've made a stop since I see'd them!" Billy suddenly exclaimed. "I bet a brass cow they got off at Reeseville. You stay here. I'll push through, and see if they're in the train, or if the conductor lit them off."

Five minutes elapsed ere Billy returned. His face was full of information.

"They've dished us, Hans! Slipped off at Reeseville, the whole four. And here we are not a mile from Paoli. There's nothin' fur it but to git off and foot it back."

"Me, too!" asked Hans.

"Sartain, 'Tain't but four miles. That will only limber you up."

"Don't want ter limper up, mooch," avowed Hans, discontentedly. "Like der train petter."

"Now you dry up, Dutchy," retorted Billy. "I'm bossing this job, and you're only a recruit. You've got to toe the mark."

In very few minutes more the train drew up at the Paoli station, and the two boys took the opportunity to seek the firm earth. They found the air a little keen as they started on their long trudge back, just cool enough to make them step out freely. Billy, who was a famous whistler, struck up an enlivening tune, and Hans found it splendid marching time as he walked briskly in his friend's wake.

"The high road ain't allers the short road," remarked Billy. "I've been here afore, and know the ropes. S'pose we take the fields fur it."

He walked forward with a confidence that inspired Hans with the fullest trust in his leadership; leaping fences, and tramping across fields which only the thin coating of snow prevented from being unpleasantly muddy, the surface of the frozen ground having been softened by the recent mild weather.

Thus they walked on for over an hour, with no appearance of the town of which they were in search.

"Look you here," cried Hans, at length. "Dis ain't fun. Where's der place dat we was goin' for to fint, hey?"

"Do you want to boss?" asked Billy, looking around belligerently.

"Nein. I don't poss never."

"Cause if you do I'll sell out to you cheap. Do you see that steeple over the hill?"

"Yaw. See him well."

"That's Reeseville. Or else we're lost. It's one or t'other sure. Keep one eye open fur tracks, Hans. Our game mought a' put out from town 'cross lots."

They had not taken twenty steps further ere Hans had occasion to put this warning into practice, a plainly-defined footprint in the snow.

Billy turned to find him eagerly pointing downward. Our hero's quick eyes at once caught the indentation, a plain, clearly-defined footprint in the snow.

"I'll score one fur you, Hans," he cried. "It's the first time I ever coched you with your eyes open and mine shut. Now it's only Joe Blizzard's

boot that made it. What's that over there by the fence?"

"Where?" asked Hans, rotating his dull eyes.

"Dare ain't nix 'g'in der fence?"

"Here," said Billy, running quickly forward. "Three tracks, by golly! Sure as shootin' it's Blizzard and the Communists."

"An' where's dey goin'?" asked Hans.

"Blizzard's goin' his road, and they're goin' their road. And his road and their road look to be mighty near the same road. It's my notion there's ructions out, Hans."

"Yaw. I's pose. How's dat?"

"They wasn't together on the train, that's sure. But they set watchin' Blizzard. And they got off arter he did, and t'other end the car. That's what the conductor said."

"An' what's der next t'ing?"

"They're arter him. That's my notion. And the kurnel told me I wasn't to lose sight of him, Hans. Jist you keep your left eye on my coat-tail. I'm a-goin' to strike out in this track, and you kin strike out in my track."

The trail was very plainly defined in the thin snow, and Billy hurried forward at the top of his speed. He soon reached a piece of undergrowth, through which progress was not so easy, and the trail proved more difficult to follow.

This opened into a wide bit of woodland. Here the snow had sifted down through the bare branches, and the ground was very thinly whitened. After beating around for awhile Billy came upon the tracks of the three Communists, as he supposed, and followed with the hope that they were in pursuit of the same game as himself.

"It's goin' to be a little hard to foller, Hans," he remarked. "Here's more bushes, and the snow's thinned out. There's a kind of queer chill gitting hold of me, Dutchy. Them's desprat' folks, them Rights-of-Man chaps. I shouldn't like to be in Blizzard's boots."

"Yaw. Me too feels all creepy like," responded Hans, shuddering.

"Maybe it's only the cold wind," said Billy. "Keep your eyes sharp open, boy. What kind of a queer fruit is that on the tree there?"

Hans looked to the tree indicated, a large oak, with a strange-looking parcel depending from one of its lower limbs.

The two boys hastened through the brushwood, their hearts beating with nervous apprehension as the bundle assumed a more and more significant aspect.

"See here!" cried Billy, in a tone of dread, "the snow's all trampled. There's been running and scuffing, too, here."

"Oh, Lord!" yelled Hans, who had advanced while Billy was examining these marks. "Oh! siust come here, Pilly! It's der man! It's der Blizzard, sur'e!"

Billy ran hastily forward, the dread parcel being now plainly defined as a man.

As he drew near it swung slowly round, and a livid, lifeless face confronted him, the unmistakable face of Joe Blizzard.

He was banging by the neck to a branch of the tree, and was quite dead.

With a yell of mortal fear, Hans turned and went crashing back through the bushes, roaring at every step as if a ghost was at his heels.

Billy felt a momentary impulse to do likewise, but bravely repressed it, and walked resolutely up with the purpose of reading a wide placard, which was placed conspicuously on the dead man's breast.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BAND OF THE CHOSEN.

"BILLY BAGGAGE."

"That's me, kurnel. That's my everyday, shirt-sleeves, bare-tooted name. When I'm standin' on my dignity I sign myself William. Don't 'low nobody to call me Billy on Sunday nor holidays. But, as long as it's you, kurnel, I won't mind."

"See here, William," said Colonel Scott, laughing. "I gave you a commission when you last did me the honor to call on me."

"The honor, kurnel! Now, ain't that spreadin' a little too much butter on my bread?"

"Not at all. Of course I know how to treat a gentleman of your dignity. You have not forgotten that commission, Mr. Baggage?"

"Mister ain't my handle," replied Billy, in a deprecating, and shame-faced manner. "And fur what you axed me to do, I don't forget easy."

"Have you looked for the man I directed you to find for me?"

"I've."

"Have you seen him?"

"I hev see'd Joe Blizzard."

"Ah! And what next? You know your instructions."

"I was to put the perlice on his track," replied Billy, with a peculiar look. "I hev handed over what was left of him. Blizzard's safe. He won't bother you no more, kurnel."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked the colonel, hastily.

"Blizzard's stepped out. Vamosed. Gone under. Slid. Fassed in his cheeks."

"Why, you young villain, do you mean that the man is dead?" cried Colonel Scott, excitedly.

"That's better than misteeling it, kurnel," returned Billy, with great satisfaction. "That's the kind of perliters I've been bring up on."

"But, about the man!" exclaimed the colonel, taking his perverse witness by the shoulders, as if strongly inclined to shake him.

"I found him," rejoined Billy, mysteriously.

"There was a bit of string round his neck, with t'other end twisted 'bout an oak limb. I's pose he'd broke it, if he'd been heavy enough."

"Do you mean that he was hung?"

"The string was too strong fur him, kurnel. There weren't no salvation fur poor Joe Blizzard. It was out in a woods, with snow on the ground, and the trees a groaning above."

Colonel Scott sat down o' a trunk in the car, and gazed fixedly at the speaker.

"This is none of your confounded jokes, boy?"

"Nary joke," protested Billy, with positive emphasis. "Yon ain't hear'n tell of it 'cause it only turned out last night. But if ever there was a door'nail deader than Joe Blizzard, I never see'd it, that's flat."

Beneath them the car-wheels rolled and groaned as Billy spoke, in usual keeping with his story.

Colonel Scott made no reply, but sat with his keen eyes fixed on the lad, who stood before him, with his shoulders resting against the car door.

"They left the train at Reeseville," he said. "Joe Blizzard and three men that followed unbeknownst to him. We tramped back from Paoli, me and Hans, the gum-drop Dutchy. Struck their trail in the snow. The three men (I knowed them), they was sneakin' behind fences. Dunno what Blizzard was arter. Takin' a short cut somewhere, I s'pose. It were a terrible short cut he took, that's sartain."

Billy drew a long breath as he took in the full force of Blizzard's step from time to eternity. The boy's face had grown very serious.

"And you found him—hanging in the wood?" asked Colonel Scott, with equal seriousness.

"You dunno what a start it gav me," continued Billy, "when he swung round and showed his face. I do believe I'd run if I hadn't to stand still to keep that durned Dutchy in countenance. He was so skinned I thought he'd shake all his teeth out, a' d all his toenails off."

"This is a strange business," said Colonel Scott, rising and pacing the floor of the car. "You knew the men, you say?"

"I seen them afore. They was among them Communists. But that ain't all, kurnel. There was a paper pinned onto the corpus. I've bringed it here."

Billy, with much effort, extracted from his pocket a closely-folded sheet of white paper, which he slowly opened as he continued to talk:

"We followed them, kurnel; me and Hans, and some of the folks around. There was the three tracks in the snow. Blizzard's track didn't go no further than that tree. There his track was wiped out, forever."

Billy paused and rubbed his eyes, which were suspiciously moist.

"We followed them to Paoli. That's where they took the cars, and their track was wiped out—but not forever."

By this time he had succeeded in unfolding his paper, a coarse white sheet, of about six inches in length by four in breadth. It was written over, in a rough but vigorous handwriting, in ink, as if it had been prepared previously to the murder.

Colonel Scott, who had been more excited by the boy's narration than he cared to let appear, took the paper from his extended hand, and strode vigorously up and down the car, reading its contents.

"Can you read, boy? Do you know what this is?" he asked.

"I kin read, and I kin write, and I kin cipher, and I kin play base-ball, and I kin stand o' my head. I've got accomplishments, kurnel," declared Billy, proudly. "I am ornamental as well as useful."

The colonel looked as if divided between his inclination to laugh at him and to kick him. He turned away with a shrug of the shoulders, and read the paper aloud, as he continued to pace the car.

"*T' a' wh'm it may concern:*

"This is the eddy of a perfumed traitor. Seek not his executioners, for they shall not be found. We are sworn to war against monopolies for the Rights of Man. This man took our oaths, and then became a common thief. Such is his fate. War to the death against monopolies, the rope for perjurers and thieves. Such is our oath."

"*The Band of the Chosen.*"

He slowly folded the paper and placed it in his pocket, a deep, fixed purpose in his eyes.

"I know it all, by heart," said Billy. "They're a high-minded set of reprobates, they are. They're goin' to make the Pennsylvania go to them if they smash half the trains on the road, and kill folks like sheep. But they won't let a poor little thief like Blizzard carry off an empty trunk on his own hook. Ain't plunder they're after, but what they call principle."

"All their efforts, so far, have been to destroy freight-trains," remarked the colonel, reflectively.

"Jist so," replied Billy. "You got a kind of armin' from them, kurnel, the last time wages was up!"

"Yes," answered the colonel, absently.

Signed like this?"

"Very much. It was signed, 'The Chosen'."

"And you told them to go to old Sam, and that you wouldn't knuckle to no sich set of reprobates?"

"I defied them," answered the colonel.

"Which is the same thing," returned Billy, looking with fearless inquiry into the disturbed face of his chief. "Ain't the men been cut a bit too steep, kurnel?"

"It could not be avoided," returned Colonel Scott, as if speaking to himself, and apparently losing all consciousness, in his self-absorption of the presence of the boy. "It was a necessity of the times, and no arbitrary tyranny of ours. Business has declined, traffic has declined, wholesale bankruptcy threatens the community. Everywhere labor has had to feel this pulse of ruin in the veins of the com-

munity. Everywhere wages has fallen. And with it all labor has not yet felt the full effects of the decline in commodities and traffic. Hard as it is to declare I fear that wages must yet reach a lower level."

Billy looked at the mighty railroad president, whose word was fate to thousands of men, his eyes opening with preternatural wisdom as he strove to grasp the full scope of his chief's oracular utterances.

"But won't there be a lively old howl 'mong the Communists?" exclaimed the boy.

"Ha!" cried the colonel, who had forgotten Billy's presence. "Well, that is another view of the case," laughing at the boy's comical look. "Do you think, my lad, that they can coerce me? Or frighten me with their threats? If it is to come to a fight between myself and the Communists I am ready for the fray. We will see who is the stronger, this band of sworn murderers or the open daring of an honest soul."

"But you ain't goin' to make no more cuts in wages, kurnel?" asked Billy.

"Not if I can help it, my boy. But let these fellows beware how they seek to drive me. In times of war extreme measures are justifiable. You know how to hold your tongue, Billy Baggage?"

"If you tell me to be mum, that's the word. I wouldn't blab then if there was a bag of dollars on every word."

"Then keep secret what I have said to-day."

"Mum's the word," replied Billy, closing his mouth with both hands, while his honest eyes glittered into the colonel's.

"These murderers must be found," continued the colonel, in a reflective tone, "if it is in the power of the law. I want your deposition, my boy, of all the minute facts connected with your knowledge of them. Here we are in the city," as the train slowly slackened speed at the West Philadelphia depot. "Take car at once to my office. Or stay, we will go together. There must be not a moment's delay."

In five minutes more Billy was seated in a carriage with Colonel Scott, and rolling rapidly toward the office of the great railroad magnate.

CHAPTER XVI.

THROUGH WIND AND SNOW.

It proved no easy task to apprehend the murderers of Joe Blizzard. The police authorities were not actively at work, and given every possible source of information, not the least important part of which was the evidence of our hero, Billy Baggage.

But their efforts had been, so far, in vain. At least a dozen men were arrested, as having some possible connection with the affair.

But Billy declared that he had a positive recollection of the faces of the three men he had seen, and when confronted with these prisoners his reply was, invariably:

"You're climbing over the wrong fence ag'in. Them ain't no more like the chaps I seen than a hoss is like a alligator."

Hans Breitmann's opinion was more laconic, but quite as decided:

"Nein. Nix. Dem ain't dem, nohow."

Allibis, too, were as plentiful as huckleberries in season, and all the accused were successively released. The true murderers had, somehow, succeeded in covering up their tracks most effectually.

Yet it was not the flight of fear; they remained as bold and daring as ever, as was given startling proof of but a few days after the hanging of Blizzard.

This was the finding of the body of Tim Dalton—he who had been concerned in the robbery of the trunk—with a pistol-wound in his heart, and plucked by the terrible hand of "The Chosen."

"I don't know as we need interfere with them," said a high official of the road, "if they choose to make way with all the thieves that have been robbing us. It is certainly a good riddance."

Yet, for all this bravado, the mystery of these daring murders, and the continued threats of the murderers, could not but give rise to deep feelings of uneasiness. The trains were run with special care, and every precaution taken against accident.

Meanwhile, Billy Baggage had not been idle, as will appear from a little conversation between him and Mr. Baggage, Sr., about this time.

Jaco Baggage was in an unusual condition, for him. He was sober.

"And that ain't all," he said, positively, to his son. "I've swore off. It was a solid swear, too, Billy. Tweren't none of your dry oaths, that's got to be licked: but a 'So help me Mighty,' and that's what I never go back on."

"Glad to hear it, dad," said the hopeful juvenile, possessing himself of his father's three-legged chair. "I didn't know jist what you solid swear was. I've seen you try it in so many shapes that didn't hold water."

"You never heered me say 'So help me Mighty' before," protested his father. "That's a lie. An' other strength than our own, Billy; and a feller's own strength won't carry him fur ag'in the smell of whisky. I believe it's just the powerfulest thing out, boy; and I don't keer if you put old Samson himself ag'in it. I've got some strength yet; but, sakes, it's just nothin' ag'in the bottle."

"I'm wonderful glad to hear that you mean it," replied Billy, rocking on his unsteady seat. "I've been a-workin' fur you, pop. I'm some guns now with Kurnel Tom Scott; and do you know I've got you back your old job?"

"What!" cried the father, springing up and clapping his heels in delight. "Firing up! On the old Volcano? Now, that's a good deal too good!"

"It's firing, pop. But the old Volcano's exploded. So tain't that. But you're to report to-morrow

morning, and you'll be put on a good injine. Allerpeived you shot down on the whisky. That's the heading of the programme."

"So help me 'Mighty, Billy. I won't tech it ag'in. But you ain't jokin', boy? I declare I hope you ain't jokin'!"

The old man's voice was full of pathetic appeal.

"I never joke, pop. Specially when I'm in earnest," said Billy, solemnly. "I've done my shear, and I want you to do yours."

"And oh! if you only keep him stiddy, Billy," cried the delighted mother, flinging her arms round her son and bringing him down from his unsteady perch. "If you only keep him from the drink, I'll bless you every hour of the day and night. And oh! won't we be a happy three!"

And the good woman seemed half wild with joy.

"Look here, wifey," growled Jacob. "I've swore off, so don't be a-chawin' on that. And I'm goin' on the road, and I'll have coal fires and pine wood to warm me up 'stead of whisky, and that's as good."

"Better, pop; for it never kicks nobody in the gutter, like whisky does."

But the boy had too much business on hand to have much time to spend in the shadows of the paternal mansion, and we soon find him bound westward again on the "afternoon accommodation."

It was not on duty, however, that he took this trip. Billy had been growing very fond of his little friend Lucy of late days, and was off on a visit to this little charmer.

Leaving the train at the nearest station he made his way over to the Hamilton mansion. As he neared the house he came face to face with a gentleman approaching from the opposite direction, and whom he at once remembered to have seen before.

It was Mr. John Jordan, the gentleman who had displayed such singular influence over the robbers, and had rescued Claire Hamilton from a serious danger. His intimacy at the Hamilton residence had grown rapidly since that occasion.

As Billy answered his curt bow with the most dignified nod, a new thought came into the brain of the young observer. That face seemed to bear two personalities, like those photographs in which a spirit-like form shows dimly behind the developed form of the sitter.

This strong image was familiar enough to the boy. But the faint image behind it was just coming into view, a dim recollection or passing resemblance, to something he had seen before, he could not tell where.

"All I know is," thought Billy, "it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I'd like to know what it comes from, fur I'm sure I ain't seen the chap 'cept here."

Lucy was glad enough to see him, and capered around him with childish glee.

"I have been having ever so nice a time, Billy," she cried, "and I wanted you so much—you don't know. Come right up to my play-room, where I have all my things laid out just the nicest. And all the dolls in their cradles."

"And rocked to sleep?" asked Billy, innocently.

"Why, of course! It would never do in the world to leave them wide awake all this time, and nobody with them. And then I have got—"

And away she went in a string of explanations of her treasures, as she dragged Billy to her store-room.

An hour's fine fun the children had together, for Billy was in that see-saw phase of existence that swings at one end upward into manhood, and at the other downward into childhood, as circumstances direct.

"See here, Lucy," asked Billy, as if influenced by a sudden thought, "does that George Howard ever come here now?"

"No," she replied. "And I don't know why, for he was a nice man, and I liked him."

"What is this other man's name?"

"That is Mr. Jordan," she answered, with a grimace.

"He ain't so nice then?"

"I don't like him," said the candid child. "Nor I don't believe that aunt Claire does either, for all she tries to look like it."

"He's sweet on Miss Claire, I s'pose?"

"You won't say nothing, Billy, if I tell you a great secret?" asked the child, eagerly.

"You couldn't drag a word from me with oxen," replied Billy, solemnly.

"I do believe something is going to happen, that's all."

"What?" asked Billy.

"Oh, something! And you will see me dressed ever so prettily in white. And there will be orange-flowers, and cake. And you must be here too."

"But what is it? A party?"

"Stoop down, Billy," Lucy whispered in his ear.

"I do believe there is going to be a wedding!"

"What? Miss Claire and Mr. John Jordan?" cried the boy, in surprise.

"Now that's quite too loud," warned Lucy. "It is only a little bird that has whispered it to me yet. I would not have aunt Claire know I have said such a thing for the world."

"Then what made you say it?"

"Cause I think it. And 'cause I like you, Billy, and don't believe you will go and talk about it."

"But you said Miss Claire didn't like him."

"Oh! that has nothing to do with weddings. I see you don't know anything at all about weddings, Billy."

"Maybe she's mad at one chap and is goin' to splice to 'tother chap just for spite. I've read of such things."

"Where?" she asked, eagerly.

"In books, Lucy. That's where folks read things."

"I should not call that a very satisfactory answer," laughed Mr. Hamilton, who just then entered

the room. "Are you going on west to-night, Billy, or will you spend the night here?"

"I've got to make tracks," replied the boy. "My train will be along in a couple of hours. I just run out here ahead."

"I will keep you company then," said Mr. Hamilton. "I am going as far as Pittsburg."

"You are!" cried Lucy. "But it is snowing. Your shoulders are quite white."

"A little snow won't hurt Billy and me," laughed Mr. Hamilton. "We are old snow-birds."

It was not snowing to hurt, though there were promises in the sky that could only be fulfilled in a deep storm.

"I don't think we will be lost in a drift," said Mr. Hamilton, as he entered his carriage at the door. "Kiss your sweetheart good-by, Lucy, and tell aunt Claire that I am going."

"I have no sweetheart; and I don't kiss boys," replied Lucy, tossing her head saucily. "Billy and I like one another. Ain't that all, Billy? And we are not sweethearts."

The impulsive child darted off into the house, and returned in a minute with Claire, while Mr. Jordan appeared more slowly in the background. The parting between father and daughter was very affectionate.

"Be sure and get through your business soon," she cried. "Don't stay an hour longer than you can help."

"And don't forget, on no account, to bring me back what you promised," exclaimed Lucy, leaping into his arms and warmly kissing him.

"Shake hands good-by, Billy," she said, demurely, extending her little hand.

Billy very gravely complied, and was about to get into the carriage, after a formal bow to Claire and Mr. Jordan, when the impulsive child again sprang forward.

"You may kiss me, Billy," she cried. "I don't care what uncle says. He is always making fun of me."

There was laughter on both sides as the carriage drove off, with its much-kissed inmates.

Billy, amid all Lucy's warm attentions, could not help noticing how Mr. Jordan had remained in the background, and the somewhat cool and distant manner of Mr. Hamilton toward him.

"He ain't in the daddy's books, anyhow, if he is in Miss Claire's," thought our hero. "It's the lop-sided bizness I know of, and if there ain't a bu'up somewhere about the concern afore long then I'm an ignoramus."

They took the train at the nearest station at which the express stopped. It was approaching night, and Mr. Hamilton took a sleeping-car, Billy going forward to his station in the baggage-car.

The snow was now falling more rapidly, and the ground was well covered with its white mantle. The wind was north-westerly, and hurled the fleecy snow about in blinding wreaths, as it chilled the faces of unprotected travelers. It was growing hourly colder, and promised to be a bleak and stormy night.

Darkness came upon the face of the earth, a white, ghostly darkness, a fleecy-winged gloom, as if unearthly things were abroad.

And the engine screamed in advance, and tore through the fierce winds and whirling snow, mocking the delicate, drifting crystals that in all their silence and softness were threatening to vanquish its impetuous speed, gathering, gathering in advance, and laying their white ban on the speed of the thundering engine.

Yet with a laugh at this shadowy foe the fireman stoked his fires, the engineer put on more steam, onward they rattled and screamed, through village, town and city, for miles after miles, for hours after hours, now pausing to feed the burring veins of the iron horse with water, now coming to a halt in the streets of a city, giving and receiving passengers by flaring, wind-blown lights, anon darting on and on, over bridges, through cuts, along level reaches, for untiring leagues, the belated traveler starting suddenly and clutching his reins as the glaring headlight burst on him like an apparition through the snow, and the train went thundering by.

Mr. Hamilton and his friend Billy Baggage knew little of this, however. The one was slumbering in the luxury of the sleeping-car. The other was sleeping the sleep of the virtuous and tired coiled up on a broad-backed trunk in the confines of the baggage-car. Our hero, however, when he set himself to it, could have slumbered soundly stretched on a tight-rope, or poised on a row of pins; so his trunk top was high o'd luxury to him.

Westward of Harrisburg, in the mountain regions which began to grow in the trans-Susquehanna region, the snow grew heavier, and had gathered in certain gorges till it was with difficulty that the strong engine tore her way through the growing impediment.

Lewistown was passed. They were approaching the wilder and more mountainous region.

"It's a thundering thick night," ejaculated the engineer, peering out into the gloom, and sounding a whistle shrilly as he knew by instinct that the Pittsburgh station was close ahead.

"It's ever it is, for Christians to be abroad in," returned the fireman, shivering in the warmth of his fire. "A're we going to be clogged, Tom? Can you put her through?"

"Or bust!" replied Tom, with a profane addition. "If it keeps on this way I'll shiver my teeth out before morning."

"Cold! You don't call this cold!" cried Tom, with a look of scorn, as he wiped the white rime from his beard, and watched the wreaths of snow hurled up by their snow-plow.

"There's a bridge across the Juniata not far ahead, and a cut just this side of it," said the fire-

man. "The snow's deep here, too. I hope it ain't choked."

"I'm going through it," replied Tom, setting his teeth. "Thunder and hail won't stop me, and I'm not going to back down for snow."

The few waking passengers felt an accession of speed as Tom put on all his steam and dashed headlong for the cut. Into, over, through the accumulated snow they rushed, the clogged wheels turning more and more slowly, the steam hissing as it escaped from the safety-valve.

"We've gone eggs, Tom. It's too much for us," said the fireman.

"Not much," replied Tom, as the almost halted engine burst through the further end of the cut and came out on a clean track ahead. The bridge was just in advance of them.

"How's that, Mike Murphy?" he asked, looking triumphantly around.

It was his last look. The engine was slowly gathering speed again as she reached the bridge. Suddenly, without a moment's warning, the end of the wooden structure gave way under the weight of the heavy engine, tumbling with a terrific thud into the frozen stream below, and dragging the engine with it.

With a terrible surge the cars felt the sudden check to their motion, the Adams Express and the baggage-cars following the locomotive over the deadly verge, while the remaining passenger-cars clattered up together ruinously on the very brink of the abyss.

Shouts, groans, cries of pain and fear, screams of wanly fright, burst from the splintered cars. Forward, the hissing steam from the locomotive told its fearful tale of devastation and death.

And whirling downward through the windy air came still the fleecy offering of the skies, already beginning to cover up the ruin with its white mantle of silence.

CHAPTER XVII.

BILLY'S PATENT EXTINGUISHER.

INSIDE the cars all was terror and tumult. Moans of anguish, cries of fear and pain, echoed through the darkness. The foremost cars were badly broken. In one—the sleeper—an ominous light glared redly on the night.

"This way! This way, quick!" cried a sharp voice, as an alert figure leaped to the ground. "Have you an ax, Harry? I am terribly afraid the sleeper is a fire. We must work like cats. It will be horrible if it gains head."

The door was badly jammed. Yells of dread broke from those within. Seizing the ax which was offered him the blows of the conductor fell thick and heavy on the unyielding door.

"Quick!" cried a voice within. "The fire is gaining. Smash in the windows if the door will not give."

He was answered by the splintering of wood under the ax. At the same moment there was a smashing of glass as a youthful figure, wielding a fence-rail as his weapon, struck right and left at the car windows.

"Hallo! there," cried a passenger, who had gained the ground. "What are you up to, boy? Drop that rail, you nimby! Do you want to let this nor'-wester in to fan the fire?"

"I'm bossing this job!" came in quick, resolute, boyish tones, as Billy Baggage, for it was he, struck another sweeping blow with his impromptu weapon.

Our hero had been roused from his sleep by the sudden break in the speed of the train as it plunged into the snow-bank in the cut. With b'yish curiosity he left the car and stood on the platform, looking forward at the toiling engine.

He was still leaning out from the side of the car, looking forward, when the bridge gave way and the locomotive plunged headlong into the abyss.

The sudden check in their motion had as sudden and unexpected an influence on Billy. Torn loose from his hold he was buried like a rocket through the air, whirling high over head, and finally plunging deep into a snow-bank. The white, thick carpet did one good deed. It broke Billy's fall, and he scrambled out with no worse result than to have the cold snow ground into his hair and skin, as if rubbed in by the fingers of a shampooer.

He had brought up on a heap of rails under the snow. Tearing up one of these, at the cry of alarm of the conductor, he commenced his sweeping assault on the windows of the burning car.

"Drop that rail!" yelled the passenger, at Billy's defiance. "Drop it, or I will drop you!"

"You dry up," was the boy's scornful reply. "Goo' gracious do you s'pose nobody knows what he's doin' 'cept you? I'm a officer on this train, and don't take orders from no chap smaller than the kernal himself."

The angry passenger ran forward to execute his threat, but stopped irresolutely as he noticed Billy's next movement. Placing the rail at an angle against the side of the car he quickly brought two others from the heap and laid them beside the other.

Then stooping he snatched up an armful of the snow, and running quickly up his impromptu bridge, dashed the white, moist blanket through the broken window upon the increasing blaze, which had now fully caught the floor of the car, and was clambering up its sides.

The door was not yet open, despite the shower of blows upon it. It was too strongly made and too tightly jammed to be readily opened.

"Here, you chap, if you want to lend a hand, pass up some of that snow!" cried Billy, sharply.

The passenger, who was alert and active enough, and who caught the lad's idea at a glance, hastened to gather up great handfuls of the half-frozen snow, and pass it up to the imperative young worker.

The fire hissed and sent up volumes of white steam as the snow was buried into its flaming jaws. Others of the passengers, of whom numbers had now swarmed from the cars, came to the assistance of the two active workers, and Billy kept the snow flying in a white cloud into the burning crater. Slowly the lurid glare diminished, the flames flickered and sank, the steam from the melted snow replaced the wreathing gleams.

"Hurrah, boys!" screamed Billy, full of excitement. "Pass along your snow-balls. I'm fetchin' her! I'm fetchin' her from base! This is your first-class, double-acting, steam fire-injile, and I'm the boss to set her rippling."

At this moment the door crushed in under the blows of the ax. But it was impossible to open it. The passengers crowded in an unmanageable mass against it.

"Stand back! one and all!" cried the conductor, as the wood splintered more and more under his blows. "Back with you!" he screamed, commanding. "The door must come open."

They swayed somewhat back at his command, but the pressure from the frightened souls nearer the fire closed the splintered door again, and held it as in a vice of flesh and blood.

The baffled axman drew back in a terror of anxiety.

"To the windows! Back in the windows and the sides of the car!" cried a voice. "We will drag them out that way!"

He hastened to obey, but ere he could deal a single blow in response, there came a shrill cry of triumph from the other end of the car.

"We've struck lie, sure as shootin'!" cried Billy. "In goes the snow, and out goes the fire! I can't see a spark left; and we've got snow enough to spare to put out ten volcanoes and two or three blast furnaces."

It was true; he had conquered; the fire was quenched; the deeper voices of the men added their bass to his shrill treble; Billy Baggage was the hero of the hour.

At the same moment some of the more energetic of the imprisoned passengers succeeded in getting the broken door open, and the terror-stricken inmates rushed headlong and tumultuously out, flying with an overwhelming fear from a danger which had already ceased to exist.

A number of them, however, were unable to move. Broken arms and legs, and serious contusions, held a number of them groaning prisoners.

"Thank God for two things!" cried the conductor, fervently. "First, that the snow in the cut there slackened up the train, or we might all be in kingdom come at this minute."

"And what is the other thing?"

"Only that the snow, in the hands of quick-witted Billy Baggage, put out that fire, and saved the poor wounded folks, there, from burning to death."

The rear cars, by this time, were nearly empty of passengers. They had escaped with no further harm than some sore bruises and cuts, the forward cars having taken the brunt of the disaster.

"I fear it's all up with the two poor fellows on the engine," exclaimed a brakeman, who had been to the bridge. "And Tom Erskine, too, in the Express car; I would not give a penny for his chances."

"Hand out a halfpenny, then. I'll take all that offers," said a fresh-faced, stalwart man, as he pressed up into the light of the lanterns.

"Tom, himself! By Jove!" cried the brakeman. "And crawled right out of the shadow of death."

"And don't you folks know it's bitter cold weather?" asked Tom, vigorously. "And freezing's as death as burning. You'll want more than excitement to keep you warm. Crowd back into your cars, every one of you, and build up raging fires. If coal gives out, rip up this sleeper for wood. Some of you lantern-men strike for the engine. Harry Hale is at work there, now, and needs help. The rest of us must get these poor hurt folks out!"

"And I want a volunteer to go back for help," shouted the conductor. "Who's my man? It's a hard journey, but it will be bad for us all, if assistance ain't brought up soon."

"How far shall we have to go?" asked a slender, red-haired man.

"To the signal station. About five miles back. The operator must telegraph east and west. To Altoona and Lewistown. If there is an engine at Lewistown, we should have it here inside of two hours."

"I'm your man," said the red-haired passenger, buttoning up his coat.

"One is not enough," exclaimed a second person. "A fellow might fall or freeze in this wind. I will go with him."

"And I!" cried Billy Baggage. "If two's better than one, three's better than two. That's my rhythmic."

"Keep the boy back," said the second volunteer. "We don't want him. This is work for men."

"I've seen boys creep through holes that men stuck fast in," retorted Billy. "And I don't hold back fur no patch of snow nor snort of wind."

"We don't want you," was the reply.

"You need not go, Bill," said the conductor. "These two gentlemen will be enough for the purpose. There is no occasion of your facing this gale."

"Oh! very well," responded Billy. "I don't know as I'm overly anxious to have my nose and toes frost-bit."

He walked forward along the train, while the two volunteers, bundling themselves up as closely as possible, set off down the track, trampling through the deep snow with a long sure stride that showed they were well chosen for the task.

Had not the conductor and his associates been too busy to heed what was going on elsewhere, they might have seen, about five minutes afterward, two

other figures heading down the track, lost to sight in a minute in the darkness of the night.

"I'm des'r'at" aforesaid of them two chaps, Hans Breitmann," said Billy Baggage, for these were our two young friends. "They were too thundering anxious to go. And there's a look 'bout them, too. Now it'd be a bad bizness to have any gum game now. We might have a freight bu'stin' into the stern of that train, and knockin' everything to eternal smash. Guess we'll foller, anyhow, Hans."

"Yaw. Dat's it, Pilly. We don't care not von gun-drop," responded Hans.

It was no easy task the boys had undertaken. After passing through the heaped-up snows in the cut, they emerged upon a more level tract, where the snow lay from eight to twelve inches deep. On they went, sinking to their boot-top; at every step, the keen, col'l blast behind them cutting like a knife to their very bones.

The snow was no longer falling, and a faint light from the sky just sufficed to render visible their track, and the dark lines of the fences on either side.

For a mile, two, three miles they trudged on and on, some parts of their way being easy from the snow having drifted from the track. In others it was heaped into almost impassable ridges. They had not overtaken the men in advance, but their path in the snow was ever visible to the boys.

"I shouldn't wonder if they'd turn out all correck arter all," said Billy. "And I know I didn't look fur it."

"How's dis. I'd like ter know?" exclaimed Hans, who was just then in advance.

"Ha! they've struck out from the road," cried Billy. "Over the fences and away through the fields. Maybe it's a short cut to the station, but I've my notion it's a short cut to the devil's fireside. Peg out, Hans. I'll call on us now."

With renewed energy the boys went on, though they were chilled to the bone by the fierce winds, and growing very weary of the long, dragging tramp through the deep snow.

Hans lacked Billy's indomitable vigor, but kept up well under the spur of his companion's fresh spirits.

Another full hour passed, and the station was not yet in sight. The terrible drag, the intense cold, was telling fearfully on the endurance of the lads.

"Yust let me sleep a little bit, Pilly," said Hans, staggering off the track.

"Don't you young hound!" exclaimed Billy, in alarm. "Hold up, or I'll bu'st your head! That ain't no feather-bed."

Hans staggered on a few steps further. He then lurched to the side of the road and would have fallen, but for Billy's helping hand.

"Don't you know that sleep now is death?" cried the frightened boy, catching the half-frozen Hans by the shoulders and roughly shaking him. "Push ahead, my chap. A dozen steps and we're home."

The dozen steps were taken, and a dozen more. They turned a short curve in the road, and there, not very far before them, gleamed out the clear light of the longed-for signal-station.

"Hey! hurrah! We're all right, Hans! Cheer up, old chap. In a minute more we'll be alongside a hot fire, and forget there was ever cold weather."

It was little more than a minute when he broke into the station, pushing the nearly frozen Hans before him, and shouting out loudly:

"Telegraph right and left! Instanter! There's a bridge smashed! The through express is bu'sted! And there's the very thunder to pay generally!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BELIEF TRAIN.

As may be imagined the operator at the signal station—startled from a doze by the sudden irruption of the two boys, and the wild exclamation of Billy—leaped up in apprehension of an attack in force by armed tramps, or the running of a lightning train through the walls of his frail edifice.

He was somewhat reassured on seeing only the brace of half-grown lads, one prostrate on the floor, the other rubbing him diligently, and trying his best to shake him into a return of his fown senses.

"S' the danger signal!" cried Billy, as he ran from the station, and returned with both hands full of snow, with which he began an energetic rubbing of the Dutch boy's face and hands. "There's blazes to pay ahead, and the next train will go to eternal smash! Here's a young chap that's a most a corporus for his tramp through the snow. Ain't there been twomen here ahead of us?"

"Not a soul," replied the operator, just recovering from his nervous start. "What has happened? What brings you here?"

"The express, that passed you an hour or two ago, is gone up; that's all. The bridge over the Juniata caved in, and down went the whole shebang. The killed and wounded is enormous. That's all I've got to say about it. Telegraph for help and for wrecking trains instanter! We've waded back five miles to give the alarm." And Billy kept up his rubbin', and rolling of Hans, who was quite wide awake enough to try to escape from the hands of his excited friend.

"This is no trick!" asked the operator, springing to his instrument. "Who are you? I don't know you."

"Don't know me!" exclaimed Billy, rising to his knees in surprise. "Don't know Billy Baggage, the premium trunk-smasher, the infine pile-driver, the boss boy of the road? Where've you been bring up, I'd like to know? S'pose you'll be sayin' next that you don't know George Washington, or General Jackson, or Kurel Tom Scott, or nobody that's worth knowin'!"

The operator laughed as his fingers played deftly

upon the instrument, sending news of the disaster east and west, to startle attentive ears miles away from that little cabin in the wilderness.

"I have heard of you," he briefly said. "Your name is a warrant for your news."

"I s'pose so," replied Billy. " Didn't I git flung, like a base-ball, off the baggage-car, and dig a ten-foot well in a snow-bank? And didn't I pelt out the fire in the sleeper with snowballs? And ain't I trudged five miles with old zero clean out of sight above me? Come here, Hans, you crazy rascal; you're half-froze yet, and you know it."

Hans had succeeded in escaping from the torture which Billy was administering to him in allopathic doses, and now stood erect in a corner of the station, waving his rough doctor off wildly with his hands.

"You ust go 'way, Pilly Baggage!" he cried, imploringly. "I ain't nutting ails me, and you ust keep your hands away. I'm all full of pins and needles mit your ruppling."

"You're a dead boy, Hans," exclaimed Billy. "If you don't let me rub the life back into you. Come here, you lively little corpse."

He made a dash at his victim, and for a minute there was a sharp wrestle in the corner of the hut, while the operator's instrument still clicked and clattered away.

"What under heaven has broke loose there?" he cried at length, disturbed by the noise of the struggle.

"It's all this ungrateful young rat," cried Billy, who had now got Hans down, and was diligently kneading him. "He ought to be on the broad of his back, half-dead with the cold this minute; and he knows it. I s'pose he'll be sayin' next that I didn't save his nose and his fingers from dropping off."

"Anyhow I think you have welded them on tightly enough now, Billy," replied the amused operator. "Let up on the boy. You never saw a cricket livelier than he is now."

"If he ain't plavin' possum," said Billy, looking askance at his squirming friend. "There ain't no knowin' these Dutch boys, what tricks they're up to."

He slowly got up, releasing his patient, who squeezed himself back into his corner again, as if in mortal fear.

"It's lucky fur him anyhow that he had Billy Baggage along," said our hero, with a shrug. "The little ninny thought a snow-bank was a feather-bed, and he'd laid down for a snooze if I hadn't vetoed his little game, and boot-toed him into your shanty. Come here, Hans. What are you shivering over there fur? I ain't goin' to eat you. Come here and hug the stove, and thank the stars that your nose is on your face this minute."

Hans advanced gingerly from his corner, feeling his organ of smell critically, as if to assure himself of its safety.

"What for you rup my face mit snow, yust tell me dat now?" he queried, as he got within the circle of warmth of the stove.

"To keep you from kickin' the bucket, Dutchy; if you know what that is. Any news, Mr. Telegrapher? Anything on the road?"

"Yes," replied the operator. "There is an engine and couple of working cars near ready to start from Lewistown. They are only waiting to get some of the road hands on board. I have telegraphed to Altoona for doctors and hospital cars."

"Hospitals on wheels, hey? I didn't know you had any such riggins."

"I think we can furnish some'ing that will answer," smiled the operator, as he turned again to his clicking instrument. "All right. Lewistown has started," he continued.

"And the sooner Altoona cits on the track the better," returned Billy. "I s'pose there's a grit of hurt folks waiting. And, do you know, it's outrageous cold out!"

"Hug the stove, Billy. I should judge you would need a thawing."

"Oh, no! It warmed me up tussling with this log-sided Dutchman. Shouldn't wonder much if I rattled all the freeze out of his bones, too. A hard tussle is just about as good as a hot stove to limber a feller up."

"Dat's so, Pilly," retorted Hans. "I'm just so limber as if I'd been walked o'er py six miles, you pet."

Laughing at Han's expense the operator drew up nearer the stove and questioned the boys more closely in reference to the accident.

Afte their conversation had continued for some time it was interrupted by the shrill whistle of a locomotive close at hand. The headlight of the engine glared full into their faces as they opened the door and looked out. In a minute more it had come to a halt.

"Hello, there!" cried the engineer, loudly. "Was it this station the alarm came from?"

"Yes."

"Where's the wreck?"

"Five miles ahead. The bridge has caved in. Half the train is in the river. Push ahead lively."

"Hold hard therel! Here's a passenger!" exclaimed Billy, as he sprang upon the engine. "You stick there and thaw out, Hans. Good-by." He waved an adieu to the operator.

"And who are you that wants to steal a free ride?" asked the engineer.

"File on your steam fust, and ax your questions arter," said Billy, in a tone of authority. "Let her drive."

"Well, now she's drivin'," retorted the engineer, as the train began to gather headway. "Now who are you?"

"One of the chaps that runs the Pennsy. I'm Billy Baggage. If you hain't heard of me afore it's

'cause your eddication ain't all it ought to be. And I'm not much on the brag neither."

"Hello! my young game-cock!" exclaimed the engineer, looking into the handsome and energetic face of his passenger. "Well, if you couldn't crew the steeple off a meeting-house, I'll give in. That's the loudest whistle out of the smallest boiler I ever heard. I bet you're a piece of stray baggage, without an owner."

"I ain't fur sale, anyhow," retorted Billy, somewhat miffed. "What do you call that streak of red on the sky theren behind us?"

"That's daylight," replied the engineer.

"I dunno when it was wuss wanted," said the boy. "And the snow's done, and the wind ain't so sharp-edged. And all that's a blessing fur the poor souls ahead."

"We are close therer now," responded the engineer.

"Yes. Not a half-mile. Look out you don't bu'st in the back end of the train, and make bad enough jist ten times wuss."

"All right. Any more orders?" asked the engineer, grimly, his keen eyes looking ahead into the thinning darkness.

"Guess that's enough to try you with," replied Billy, determined to have the last word. "I want my conscience clear if there's to be damage done."

"Your conscience!" retorted the engineer. "It's tougher than a cast-iron stove-plate. Shut up now; we're getting near danger."

In fact they were on the very verge of the snow-ed-up cut. With a shrill whistle of alarm the engine plunged desperately into the drifted snow, the cut being half-filled up again by the action of the winds.

The thick mass whizzed right and left as they tore onward, the speed of the engine rapidly decreasing as the sunk deeper into the snowy bed.

"Played!" cried Billy, with set teeth, as he looked forward.

"Not a bit," returned the engineer. "The Lively Polly ain't easy played. There she sails!"

He was right. The cut was passed. But the engine came almost to a dead halt as she emerged on the level reach beyond.

At the same instant the first gleam of the sunlight shot westward from the horizon. That terrible night was passed. Day had again dawned upon a snowed-in world.

The ears of the new-comers were greeted with a loud shout of welcome. Before them stood a throng of passengers from the wrecked train, who had sprung hastily from the cars on hearing their whistle of warning.

The new train consisted of two tool-cars, and a score of strong-armed road-hands, who leaped eagerly out, and hurried forward to the scene of the wreck.

"Many killed and wounded, Mr. Perkins?" asked the leader of the working-gang of the conductor.

"Very few, thank Heaven," was the response. "Poor Tom Brown and his fireman have gone under. But there's nobody killed on the train. We've got some broken arms and legs, but nothing fatal."

"And the engine smashed into scrap-iron, I s'pose," said a youthful voice.

"Hey, Billy, is that you?" asked the conductor. "We have been looking for you. Where in the sun have you been?"

"Been back to the signal-station," replied Billy.

"You!" exclaimed the conductor, in surprise.

"Yes. Me and Dutchy Hans."

"What put that insaine fancy into your heads? There were two men went back."

"I didn't trust them men fur nothing," said Billy, sturdily. "Sure's better than sorry, any day. If you waited on them we'd had help here by next Christmas, for they never went near the station. They're a pair of murdering villains, and I'd bet my head ag'in a pumpkin that the bridge didn't go down without hands. Them Communists haan't been at it."

"You are right," replied the conductor, impressively. "The timbers were sawed nearly through. The whole business is a murderous scheme to destroy the train and all its passengers, which only the aid of Heaven has frustrated."

Billy hurried forward to the wreck. The baggage and express cars formed an inclined plane from the verge downward to the engine, which had broken through the thick ice, and was nearly buried. The only other car seriously injured was the sleeper, which was little more than a ruin.

Our hero, almost for the first time, now thought of his friend, Mr. Hamilton. He had been in the sleeping-car. He was not visible among the passengers. Where was he?

With quick alarm Billy sought the ear to which the wounded passengers had been removed, and went through it with eyes half-afraid to gaze into the faces of the poor unfortunate, lest he should find his friend among the most horribly mangled.

He came upon the face at last. But it was white and still, with closed eyes, and a frightful pallor of countenance.

"How is he?" asked Billy, in a frightened whisper.

"Dead!"

"No," replied the person in attendance. "Concussion of the brain, we think. He is one of the worst cases."

CHAPTER XIX.

GEORGE HOWARD EXPLAINS.

BRIGHTLY shone the sun that next day, the cold north winds fell, and the soft south whispered of flowers to come when the snows of winter should melt away.

And yet no glamour of sunshine, no fragrant breath of south winds, could cure the work wrought in that dry wintry night, or bring joy to the hearts where the swift-flying news had sown sorrow.

Yet, happy chance had, in a great measure, foiled the murderous intents of the villains. But for the fortunate slackening of the train, the destruction of life must have been terrible. As it was, only the engineer was killed, though the fireman was so badly hurt that his life was despaired of. Besides these, three or four of the sleeping-car passengers were dangerously hurt.

The train from Altoona arrived shortly after day-break, and the wounded passengers were at once carefully removed to comfortable cars, and, under skillful medical care, were taken on to the mountain city.

At the same time the gang of road-hands set at work to clear the track, and to make preparations for removing the engine from where it lay, half-supported by the ice of the frozen river.

In doing this, another discovery of importance was made. On the end of the bridge, near the sawn timbers, a placard was found, similar to those already received by the officers of the road, and signed by the mysterious band of "The Chosen."

It recited the threats which had already been made in the event of the wages of the employ's not being advanced, and pointed to the present accident as an instance of what the unknown conspirators were capable of, and were sworn to accomplish, in case their demand was not complied with.

The "Chosen" were to be found everywhere when work was to be performed, nowhere when search was made for them. They defied the road, and would continue their efforts until justice was done.

Such were the features of this remarkable document, which was at once forwarded to the main office of the company, and produced there a bitter determination not to yield to the demands of these villains, but to make the most strenuous efforts to discover and punish them.

It was the second day after the disaster that our young friend, Billy, on his next trip out from Philadelphia, came suddenly face to face, in the ladies' car, with Claire Hamilton.

She was pale and looked agitated, and recognized the boy with a nervous excitement unusual to her. She took his hand and drew him into the vacant seat beside her.

"Do you know anything of this unhappy accident?" she excitedly asked. "You went out with my father. Were you in the train when he was hurt?"

"No," replied Billy.

"Oh! I was in such hopes you could give me more information than the meager telegraph dispatch. When did you leave the train?"

"Just 'bout that time," said Billy. "I was turnin' summertime into a snow-drift while the train was bein' smashed. That's how I didn't happen to be aboard."

"Then you were there? You escaped in safety?" she eagerly queried. "You can tell me—"

"All about the smash-up," interrupted Billy. "And how me and Hans went back to the signal station which was just 't other side the North Pole, and how Hans would 'n been froze into a marble image if I hadn't scoured him down with snow."

"But about my father," she said, breaking into his volubility. "Did you see him? Was he indeed seriously hurt?"

"Now what fool sent you such news as that?" cried Billy, excitedly.

"It is not true then? I have been deceived?" Her eyes were burning with hopefulness as she looked into the boy's candid face.

"I don't believe he had no legs nor no arms broke, Miss Claire," replied Billy. "I will giv in that his senses was knocked clean out of him, and his face was as pale as a whitewashed ghost. But that's nothin' to be bad skeered about. It was the sudden fetchin up, I s'pose. Mought have got in the same way myself if I hadn't gone on when the train stopped."

"He was pale, and had not recovered his senses when you left him! Was that long after the accident?"

"Oh! not more than three or four hours. I went on to Altoona, you see, to be sure he was comf'able. You goin' on?"

"Yes," she returned, in a depressed tone. Billy's information had not been very reassuring.

"Not all alone, I s'pose?"

"No, Mr. Jordan is with me."

"The chap I seen at your house 't other night?" asked Billy, quickly.

"I do not know whom you refer to," she answered, in an offended tone.

"I've seen him, Miss Claire, and I don't like him for nothing," Billy resolutely responded, "and there ain't no use sayin' I do. But my eyes is my eyes, and I don't s'pose you're goin' to borrow them fur youn. Good-by, Miss Claire. I've got bizness or I wouldn't leave you so sudden."

"Good-by, Billy," she said, with a sickly smile. "I may borrow your eyes yet, but not just now."

The boy went on through the train, muttering to himself:

"There's somethin' a-workin' itsel through my brain that I'll git hol of the handle of yit. And it's all 'bout that Mr. John Jordan. I ain't goin' to let Miss Claire giv herself away too cheap. There was the tall chap that went out ahead of me and Hans to the signal; and that slipped out 'cross lots. If he hadn't brick-dust hair and a turn-up nose, and a black patch on one of his blinkers, and had been the least trifle shorter, I'd sworn it was the same fellow. All I've got to say is that Miss Claire's mighty unlucky in her lovers."

As this thought ran through his mind he lifted his eyes—to see the first of those lovers; for the stalwart form and handsome face of George Howard appeared in the car just before him.

Billy pressed past him with lowered eyes, unno-

ticed by Mr. Howard, who had the look of one seriously preoccupied.

"There's somethin' a-brewin' t'ere," thought the boy, looking back at the strong frame of the man, who was moving on toward the door of the car.

It was in the smoking-car that this encounter had taken place. Our hero's next recognition was of Mr. John Jordan, who was leaning over the edge of a seat, talking to a friend, and smoking with a rapidity that seemed nervous. His eyes were beat down the car, in the direction of Mr. Howard.

"Guess it's pull Dielz, pull devil, between them two; and if they'd both pull themselves away from Miss Claire I'd be better satisfied," soliloquized Billy. "If there ain't ructions 'n the car 'fore any of us is six months older than I don't know beans. I kin smell fun ahead 'bout as fur as the next boy 'oin'."

George Howard had by this time left the car, and proceeded on through the train. Entering the ladies' car, he suddenly stopped, with a slight flush of the face, on finding himself, as Billy had done, face to face with Claire Hamilton.

She had seen and recognized him at the same moment, and turned away to conceal her extreme agitation. In her nervous state this sudden recontre filled her with an unimaginable feeling.

He hesitated, the flush deepening on his face, his manner irresolute. For one minute he seemed inclined to pass on without other sign of recognition. In fact she thought he had gone, and lifted her eyes only to find the intense regards of his searching orbs fixed upon her.

His resolution to address her seemed to be taken instantly.

"Miss Hamilton," he said, in a low tone, stooping toward her. "I am glad of this meeting. I have wished to see you."

Claire looked up at him with a questioning surprise, that was half dread. She could not trust herself to speak, for fear that nervous agitation would overcome her.

"You have wronged me," he continued. "Who has belied me I know not, nor from whom came that utterly ridiculous letter you gave me in evidence of some mysterious crime on my part. But you should not have been ready to believe such calumnies."

"It was not the letter," she answered, in a low, constrained tone. "I had other evidences. And from a person in whom I had every confidence. I was forced to believe it."

"From whom?" he asked.

"I prefer to give no names," she replied. "My informant is honest, and has no reason to be an enemy of yours."

"But, good heavens, Claire, what is my crime? I am in the dark, utterly in the dark, as to what I have done."

She looked at him with a doubtful, wavering look, into which an element of hope slowly grew.

"You know," she said, with downcast eyes. "I made it clear to you in our last conversation."

"I know nothing, Claire, except that you wounded me with bitter words; and that I love you through it all."

There was no one within several seats of them. He was leaning over her seat and looking into her face with burning eyes as he spoke these words.

"I may have been hasty," she slowly replied. "You were so fierce and quick. You denied nothing. You left me to believe all."

"All what, Claire? I am indeed ignorant of what I am accused."

"I dare not tell you. If you are indeed innocent, the crime is mine. The crime of suspicion, distrust, disbelief in my own intuitions."

"You must tell me all," he said. "I must know from what I have to clear myself. I do not blame you, Claire. I know you would not lightly have credited calumny against me."

She turned her eyes away, confused and trembling.

"It has been too lightly, George," she softly replied. "I should not have doubted where I loved. But I had heard such tales, so direct and reiterated. And you were so—"

"So hot and angry," he interrupted. "I know now to what you refer. I did not know then. There have been doubts cast upon my honesty."

"You were accused of being an accomplice of these train robbers," she hastily broke in. "Of these wreckers. The stories were so direct and detailed. There were so many whisperings about you. Your business was so mysterious. I have never dared ask you."

"You would not have learned," he replied. "There are other interests than my own involved. The time may soon come in which I can cease this secrecy. At present I must rest under the imputations of my enemies."

"No, no, George!" she cried, with a sudden revulsion of feeling. "Tell me nothing. I have been criminally, unpardonably distrustful. But it was my love that made me exacting. I would have had you above the shadow of doubt."

"Which no man is, dear Claire," he replied, taking her hand in his close grasp. "I cannot pretend to saintliness. But I love you, dear; and class myself indifferent honest."

"I have been wild, foolish, in my distrust," she said, clasping his hand firmly in her two own, and looking up with a look of trust into his eyes. "I do not know what I might have done. But— What do those men want, George?"

Two men had just entered the car, and were walking forward, their eyes fixed with a peculiar expression upon George Howard.

One of them, a tall, strongly-built man, dressed in plain black, now stepped forward, and laid his hand, with a light touch, on Howard's shoulder.

"You will come with us," he said.

George straightened up, instantly, shaking off the man's hand by the movement, and looking at him with eyes that flamed lightning.

"How dare you, sir? What does this mean?" he exclaimed, in tones that vibrated with indignation.

"I thought, maybe, you mightn't want the lady to know," returned the man, sarcastically. "But, as long as you're so ignorant, I'll tell you. You're arrested for train-robbing. You're known, my friend, for one of the devils that sawed that bridge, the other night. Drop your hand! Instantly!" he cried, sharply, as George's hand went to his breast. "If it is to be a game of bullets, I want the first hand."

But there seemed no purpose of resistance in George Howard. A marvelous change came upon his face. He seemed to shrink and tremble under this terrible accusation.

Claire looked at him, with eyes wild with agonized questioning.

"There, where my poor father was injured!" she moaned, as if this thought alone filled her mind.

"But, this is a mistake! A hideous error!" cried George, with a despairing accent. "What villain has brought you men here—now—"

"Not much of a blunder, I guess," said the man, laughing. "We're not generally that kind of horses that race on the wrong track. Will you come quietly, my man, or shall we have to take you?"

Claire's eyes were fixed on George with a lurid intentness. No change in a feature of his face escaped her. She read a shrinking dread and terror there, of which she had believed him incapable. It was agonizing, the sudden change in her soul from trust to doubt, from respect to contempt.

For one moment he straightened himself up, as if inclined to resist. Then, while a quick change passed over his face, he said, quietly;

"Very well. I am your prisoner. This horrible mistake shall be explained, Miss Hamilton," he continued, turning to Claire. "But not now, nor here. There are reasons, which I dare not even name—"

"I think not," replied the man, coarsely. "Watch the newspapers, miss, and you will see the reasons brought out on the witness-stand. Are you coming, sir?"

George replied by walking forward with a stately tread and in an erect attitude, not looking again at Claire as he left her side.

"And is this the end of it all?" she muttered, with trembling lips, as her burning eyes followed his form. "Cowardice added to crime! And he had convinced me that I was wickedly false to him. If he had not cringed so, and let such base terror creep into his face. Thank Heaven that I have been saved from him!"

And yet a great surge of love for the man before her, and of despair for her own fate in life, passed through her soul as these cynical utterances left her lips. She sat like one stricken with a sudden paralysis of the brain.

Meanwhile the officers and their captive passed on through the train.

As they entered the smoking-car John Jordan, who still stood there smoking, looked at them with eyes in which a certain triumph lurked. His gaze was fixed on the faces of George Howard, as he crowded into the seat to let him pass, with a cool stare that was full of insult. But the prisoner never even saw him, looking forward with eyes that held nothing tangible.

As the officer who followed came up Jordan whispered quickly in his ear:

"That is he. On your lives do not let him escape. He is a precious prize."

Trowing away his cigar he sauntered carelessly back through the cars. Claire Hamilton hardly lifted her eyes to notice him as he quietly took the vacant seat beside her.

But at one quick glance he had seen that she was death pale, trembling, and crouched as if all energy, all muscular force had been stricken from her.

"You look ill," he said, in a tone of commiseration.

"What has happened?"

"Do not speak to me now!" she cried, with quick, choking utterance, while her hand was uplifted as if to repel some unseen foe. "I cannot bear one word now!"

With a slight curl of the lip Jordan lapsed into silence. Yet he could feel by the trembling of the slight form by his side the agony that was quivering in her soul.

CHAPTER XX.

CLEARING UP.

The organization of the mysterious band of "The Chosen" was wonderfully calculated to defeat the ends of justice. The efforts of the detective force, arrests of suspected parties, offering of liberal rewards, all seemed ineffectual in gaining any positive clew to the secret of this strange and terrible gang of murderers.

A number of other parties were seized and placed in the same prison with George Howard, the city jail of Harrisburg.

The country was searched far and wide for the two men who had volunteered for the same duty which Billy and Hans had so successfully accomplished.

Their turning off from the line of the road and failure to report at the signal-station naturally directed suspicion against them, and every effort was made for their discovery.

The deep bed of snow with which the country was covered aided essentially in the search, and their track was readily followed for several miles east from the road, ending in a small hamlet called Princeville.

Here the few inhabitants were closely questioned, and it was soon learned that the two suspected men had appeared there early in the morning after the

accident, and had engaged the blacksmith of the place, who added to his legitimate business the hiring out of a sleigh, to drive them over to the nearest station on a branch road running to Chambersburg.

The crew was followed up to this latter town and there utterly lost. The men had evidently left by some early train, and it would be no easy matter to tell just where, or in what direction they had gone.

Neither ticket-takers, nor ticket-sellers remembered seeing any red-haired man, answering to the description given, and it became shrewdly suspected that this auburn head-covering was a disguise, and that the fugitives had changed their appearance at Chambersburg, before venturing to leave the town.

Efforts were also made to arrest the party of conspirators whom Billy Baggage and his father had seen and overheard at a certain drinking-house, in the city of Philadelphia. But these endeavors proved equally futile. The proprietor of the house denied any knowledge of the parties, otherwise than that they had hired a room from him for a few nights, and had ordered very freely of ale and half-and-half. He might know them if he should see them, but he knew nothing about their business.

Billy Baggage was made liberal use of during these continuencies. He had been exceptionally favored in seeing various parties of the conspirators, and his powers of recognition were freely called on to identify suspected parties.

But either his memory had grown sadly treacherous, or the right ones were still at large, for none of them answered to his mental pictures of "the pack of villains" he had seen.

And in the midst of this investigation a strange document was handed in to the officers of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which gave them, at least, some food for thought.

It appeared that the workingmen's clubs of the city, more than one of which was strongly infected with Communism, had grown tired of being publicly classed with an organization whose whole purpose seemed murder and destruction.

They protested in the strongest terms against being identified with this mysterious body, claiming that while thoroughly in *opposition* with any movement in favor of the rights of the workingman, they deprecated every form of violence, and abhorred bloodshed as much as could any men in the land.

As American workmen they demanded just treatment; making no appeal to generosity; and would strive for justice till the last moment of their lives. But they were men of the nineteenth century, civilized and law abiding. Whatever their private views, whether Communistic or otherwise, they had no sympathy with murderers or outlaws of any type, and earnestly demanded justice from the press and from all railroad officials. They concluded by offering their aid to the company, by any means in their power, to bring the villains to justice, and free them selves from the odium of suspicion which had been laid upon them.

This document was signed by a number of leaders in the workingmen's movement, and was written in an earnest and dignified tone that could not but have its effect on those to whom it was addressed.

It became evident that the villainous gang who made murder and destruction their modes of intimidation, were in no way affiliated with the American workingmen. They seemed rather to be a band professing some extreme Communistic views, and affected by a rough sense of honor, which had manifested itself in such terrible ways as in the hanging of Joe Blizza, and the shooting of his confederate in crime.

Whoever they were, and however organized, it was plain that their purpose was determined hostility to the Pennsylvania Railroad, and to all who gave it their support, and a deadly determination not to let their purposes be used as a cloak for robbery or peculation.

They formed the extreme left wing of the labor party, fell in their objects, and terrible in the secrecy of their organization, and in the grim vigor with which they punished traitors to their oaths. Well might the moderate and honorable members of the party denounce them, and offer their aid to the railroad officials in their discovery.

Meanwhile such parties as had already been arrested on suspicion had all been released, with the exception of George Howard and one or two others, against whom there seemed somuchore of evidence that would hold.

Two or three months had thus passed since the date of the wrecked train, and the officers of the law seemed no nearer a solution of the mystery than at first.

George Howard had not yet been put on trial, though it was expected his case would be called at the approaching term of court.

Mr. John Jordan, who had been active in his arrest, appeared to be acquainted with some positive evidence against him, and was likely to be called by the Commonwealth as one of their main witnesses.

Meanwhile he had become more and more attentive to Claire Hamilton, and the rumor was everywhere abroad that they were engaged lovers.

Mr. Hamilton's injury proved to be severe concussion of the brain. It was found impossible to remove him from Altoona, whither he had been taken, and Claire remained there in care of him. In this filled duty she received useful aid from the assiduous attentions of Mr. Jordan, and could not but feel deeply grateful for the earnest kindness of this true friend, whose devoted attention she could not help comparing with the deep professions, and false actions, of him who had come to her with a lie in his mouth and a soul stained with the deepest crime.

Evidently the world had reason to make a match of their own devising between Claire Hamilton and Mr. John Jordan.

CHAPTER XXI.

TILLY'S BUDGET OF NEWS.

"THERE ain't no use talkin', pop. You're maybe a good hand at shovelin' in coal; but when it comes to puttin' on the valves, and slidin' in the steam, and lettin' her sit, it takes a chap that's been there — like me. Tain't everybody was born to be an engineer."

Billy Baggage was seated on a large piece of coal, in the tender of the engine, facing his father, who, with a countenance well begrimed with coal-dust, leaned easily on his shovel, and looked rather proudly at his braggart son.

"Hear him, Jack," he said, turning with a laugh to the engineer. "It takes a young cock to crow loud. To hear the boy you'd think he'd been brought up on a diet of throttle-valves, and weaned on crank-pins."

Jacob Baggage had much improved in appearance since we last saw him. He was cleanly shaved, and had an earnest, solid look about his face, in strong contrast to his former expression. His tones, too, were firm and decided. Only a slight tremble in the hand that rested on the shovel told the story of the recent inebriate.

"For tis," responded the engineer, "boys learn to crow, nowadays, as soon as they learn to walk. They're like a chicken in that, they cackle before they fairly know how to scratch."

"That's all gay enough," said Billy, amusing himself by throwing slivers of coal at the fire-door of the engine. "But I haven't been five years on the road for nothin'. And you know it, Jack Luit, for wasn't it you that taught me how to use them iron handles? I dunno now what you call them, but I be I know what they're for."

"You are sharp enough, Billy, I'll admit that," replied Jack, with a smile on his broad face. "I don't know anybody, Jacob, that I'd sooner trust with my injine than this same boy; 'cept that he's too thundrin' ventureome. He's just the one, if he found a large down, that'd try to take a river at a fly. And you'd find him coming into the stations an hour ahead of the time-table."

"And ain't it alters better a mile too soon than an inch too late?" responded Billy, from his black diamond stool. "That's the Baggage motto. Allers be ahead of time and you'll never be left."

"Assume you pa's a station afore the schedule time, and leave half the passengers coolin' their heels and lessin' the road. How would that look in reports to head-quarters?" asked Jack Blunt, as he blew a long, shrill peal from the steam whistle. His experienced eye had detected proximity to a town yet unseen.

"I'd like to know myself how our smart young colt would do then," remarked Jacob, with a laugh. "I'd advise them to larn the Baggage motto," responded the boy, coolly, "to be alars ahead of time and they'd allies be in time. I'd put out my sign; time and the injine don't stop for nobody."

"How many train-robbers have you spotted lately?" asked Jack, sarcastically. "Gone a'round in any trunk? Or wad'n after red-headed reprobates, hey?"

"That's played out," retorted Billy, with an air of great disgust. "I'd luv a' cow if they'd let me ride when they want their rubbers identified. I ain't nobody's forty-gallon gallery. Nor no rogues' directory neither."

"That's all 'cause you ain't spotted any," said Jack. "If you hit the mark once you'd be proud as a turkey-cock."

"Not much," returned Billy, decidedly. "I ain't a bit overanxious that-a-way."

"Now don't you be a-blowing, Billy boy," remarked his father, fondly passing his grimy hand over the lad's short hair. "You'll be saying next that me and Jack don't know the natur' of boys. Why, you rascally little chap, there's men a-livin' I'd be glad to be in your boots, if you'd nail one of them cubs."

"You bet on that!" exclaimed Jack, positively. "Blame me if I wouldn't like to be the feller myself!"

"They'd be locked up," returned Billy. "That's what I'm a-lookin' at. I pose there's folks that's got to come to it; but I don't think I'd enjoy turuin' the key. It must be blazin' blue to have to live as close as an apple in a dumplin'. To be in a place where you can't turn a bandspring 'thout knockin' off your toe-nails ag'in' one wall and your fingers ag'in' t'other. And not a fence rail, nor a dandeline, nor a hornets'-nest fur months and months together. And the sunlight comin' in like water through a strainer; in droplets like. Now that ain't the kind of victuals I'd ax anybody in to fur a free lunch." And Billy got up and stretched his limbs, as the train slowed up for the nearing station.

"How about your friend, George Howard, then, that you got into the stone jug?" asked Jack, with his hand on the lever, and his eye beat keenly ahead.

"He ain't no friend of mine; and I didn't git him into trouble neither," replied Billy, as he sprung from the slowing engine and ran ahead to the depot.

They stopped here to water, and it was full five minutes before they got again under way.

Billy had regained his seat on the lump of coal, and Hans Breitmann was doubled up on the upturned plate of a shovel beside him.

But there was a new expression in our hero's eyes, a look of conscious self-importance, or of superior knowledge, which had come to him since he left the train. If he was bright enough for two, however, Hans looked stupid enough for a couple more, so between them they struck a fair average in the matter of intelligence.

"By the way," asked Jack, after he had got the

engine once more under full headway, "don't Howard's case come up this week?"

"I think so," replied Jacob, dropping the shovel, with which he had been vigorously driving coal into the blazing fire under the boilers. "I heard yesterday that it would start to-morrow."

"Then you'll be wanted again, Billy."

"Neh. I dinks not," responded Hans, lifting up his fish-like eyes.

"How's that, Dutchy?" cried Jack, sharply.

"What do you know about it, hev?"

"Ask Pilly," returned Hans. "I knows nix, nuttin', 'cept vot I hear from Pilly."

"So it's you, boy," said Jacob, turning proudly to his son. "I thought I seen it in the shine of your eyes. You've got another pig by the tail, eh?"

"It's more of a rabbit than a pig," replied Billy, modestly. "Hans don't miss it much, though. There won't be no trial."

"How's that? Is the case give up? Ain't there nothing against the many?" asked Jack.

"Neh. Tain't dat. Ask Pilly; he knows," returned Hans, scratching his head knowingly.

"And what the thunder is it you know, Billy?" asked Jack, testily.

"It's as much work getting a story out of you two boys as to get a dead rat out of a well—and worth as much, I suppose, when it's got."

"Afore you cook your rabbit you've got to catch it," was Billy's enigmatic reply.

"Catch it!" cried Jacob. "Haven't they nabbed it is one long ago?"

"Nabbin's one thing, and keepin's another," retorted Billy. "He's cut stick; broke jail and slid fur it. There's not as much left of him as an old boot for them to freeze onto. It'll be a high old trial, with nothin' in court but the two lawyers to scratch themselves to pieces like Kilkenny cats."

"Where did you hear all this?" asked Jack, in surprise.

"Back there, where we just stopped. When they fetched him in his grub this morning they found nothin' but an empty cell, 'cept one little item."

"What was that?" queried Jacob.

"A door open, a ladder ag'in' the jail wall, and a rope made of a bed-blanket."

"An' der Howard gone," broke in Hans. "Yust like a lie gum-drops. Dey don't stay in der mouth mucch time."

"And don't want a ladder to climb down a feller's throat with, hey, Hans?" cried Billy, cheerily.

"Not mooth, Pilly; you pet," responded Hans, with a broad grin.

"Did you hear any more, Billy?" asked Jack, with great interest. "Was he caught again?"

"He ain't the kind that gits caught easy," replied Billy. "That kind of game they'd best freeze onto whle they've got it. I'll bet a big apple they don't nail George Howard in a ditch."

There was a look of satisfaction on Jack Blunt's face, as if he was greatly pleased with this escape.

"Is 'is news-bag empty yet, Billy?" asked his father, in a slightly sarcastic tone, as he turned again to his shovel.

"Neh," retorted Hans. "Pilly's bag ain't never got empty so soon."

"Always carry more than one 'tater, anyhow," said Billy.

"Give us a taste of your other 'tater then, Billy," responded Jack, turning curiously round.

"Seems to me that grown folks is cur'us, sometimes," remarked the boy, getting slowly up from his uncomfortable seat. "It's just this then, there's a high old time a-brewin'; and if there ain't an earthquake long the road afore a week of Sundays, then I'm a blower."

"What is it? Let it out, and don't be piping forever to such an old tune."

"Folks ain't been meetin' and resolutin' so long fur just fun," continued Billy, with the gravity of an oracle. "I don't b'lieve that there'll be a quiet time if there's another cut made in wages."

"I think there will be some kicking against it," remarked Jack, with a snap of the eye.

"It's been gone and did then," said Billy. "There's a ten per cent cut on the B. and O., and folks say that there's everlastin' thunder in the air."

"But we've got nothing to do with the Baltimore line," returned Jack, a trifle relieved.

"Don't you swaller the half of that now. The lightning's goin' to strike nearer home. Tain't a cut in wages though."

"What is it then?"

"A cut in men," returned the boy oracle. "There's orders out to double up on all the freights. To build up one train out of two and lay off half the men."

"It'll never be stood," cried Jack, with a ponderous oath, as he brought his fist down with heavy emphasis.

"How can we help standing it?" asked Jacob.

"Anyhow it don't touch us passenger hands."

"What touches one touches all," exclaimed Jack, excitedly. "We've got to stand together or tumble together; that's me."

"And if a feller makes a fool of himself I've got to make a fool of myself to keep him company? That ain't just the Baggage motto," said Billy, contemptuously.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OLD AND THE NEW.

It was a rather sad sick-room, that of Mr. Hamilton. For several months, now, he had lain in his none too cheerful hotel apartment, with its outlook upon a plexus of railroad tracks, and within hearing of the muffled thunder of the Altoona work-shops. Half-way between death and life was this long vigil, and the doctor, with all his hopeful visage in the presence of the patient, left the sick-room with a dubious look in his clear eyes.

Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.

There was about the room, to be sure, such soft touches of comfort, and delicate bits of beauty, as only a cultured woman's hand can leave. But long sickness brings around it an atmosphere of depression, and a painful anxiety takes the life out of every effort at cheerfulness.

Into this stage of feeling, Claire Hamilton was falling. She dearly loved her father, and her first painful excitement at his injury had now become a settled depression, which it took a strong effort to hide from his inquiring eyes.

He had lain for days in a comatose state, from which he had but gradually recovered, and only recently had regained any clearness of mental power. But with this recovery had not come any return of his physical strength. For the last month he had been gradually weakening, and Claire's fears grew bitter, as she gazed with helpless eyes on the slow iron roads of disease.

During these months, Mr. Jordan had been a frequent and attentive visitor, relieving her greatly from the hard strain of nursing, and earning her gratitude by the kind sympathy of his attentions.

She could not but contrast his behavior with that of the man who had won her young heart's love, and had given her in requital the great grief which now oppressed her.

Whispers had met her ears which threw doubts on the perfect integrity of John Jordan, and stories of ultra, and even atheistical views advocated by him. But she forgot all this gossip in the kindness and gentleness of his demeanor; forgot even an instinctive feeling of repulsion which she had once felt in his presence; and her heart swelled with grateful thanks for him who had come to her in her affliction.

"Let me see, daughter," spoke the invalid feebly, as he moved restlessly in his bed. "How warm the sun is growing. Is that a rose in the vase yonder?"

"Yes, father," replied Claire, quickly, bringing the vase to him. "I cut it fresh this morning, in the hotel garden."

"It is very fragrant," he said, taking it in his thin hands. "It is the flower of June. Are we so far in the year as that?"

"Why this is but moving into the pleasantest of seasons," she rejoined, avoiding a direct answer.

"But then to think that I have been lying here for more than three months. What a dreadful drag it must have been on you, Claire."

"No, indeed!" she cried, spiritedly. "You shall not talk that way, papa. As if I could grow weary of waiting on you, after your years and years of kinlessness."

"But, my dear, you are not strong."

She interrupted him with a laugh that had none too much mirth in it, laying her fingers playfully on his lips.

"The idea of my not being strong! And you have so often called me your young deer. I suppose because I am so healthy and wild."

"You spell it wrong, Claire," he returned, his eyes resting fondly upon her. "It should be dear."

Sao stooped and kissed him with a quick, bird-like motion, a shadow, as of tears in her eyes.

He lay silent for a few minutes, following her with his eyes as she bustled nervously about the room.

"Claire," he at length called.

"Yes, father," turning half to him.

"I am very sick, child. How sick perhaps you do not realize. I do not wish to alarm you; but you are all I have, and I cannot help feeling some anxiety about your future."

"Do not think of that, dear papa," she softly answered, her eyes turned away.

"When I am gone, Claire, you will have nobody but distant relatives. It is not a question of money, but you will need a protector; some one to whom you can cling, and who will save you from the hard rubs of the cruel world."

"You are not going! I shall not let you go!" she cried, suddenly turning and falling on her knees by the bedside, while she clasped his head in her loving arms. "And as for a protector—"

"Now, hush, Claire," he interrupted. "Young girls expect to get married in any case, whether they have their fathers or not; and I certainly do not wish my child to be an old maid. But in my present condition, dear, it becomes my duty to speak plainly. Is there no one whom—"

Sao turned away with an impulsive movement. There was a hard look in her eyes as if the thought of what might have been was present, like a ghost of the past, in her mind.

At this moment the door of the sick-room opened, and Mr. Jordan entered. His quick eyes took in the scene at a glance, and dwelt for an instant with a questioning look on the face of Claire.

He then advanced with a soft step to the bedside and took Mr. Hamilton's offered hand.

"I have been away longer than I intended," he said. "Are you better to-day, sir?"

"Worse, I fear," said the invalid, with a faint smile. "I don't know what I should do without two such attentive nurses as you and Claire. You have been very kind, Mr. Jordan."

"You would not have me let my fellow-nurse wear herself out," he replied, gayly. "You see I can't help myself. I am obliged to be attentive, for both your sakes."

The invalid looked for a moment into the speaker's smiling face.

"Come here, Claire," he said, feebly.

She advanced slowly, a conscious look upon her expressive features.

"Is it entirely for the old man's sake that you are so attentive, Mr. Jordan?" asked the invalid, with a meaning look. "Or is not your fellow-nurse one main source of attraction?"

Mr. Jordan stole a quick look at Claire, who stood

beside him, but made no answer to this significant question. Keen as were his eyes he failed to see all that was passing in her mind, the struggle between the old and the new, between dead love and living gratitude, which gave the strange expression to her face.

"I fear my child may need a protector soon," continued Mr. Hamilton. "If I but knew that she would be happy and loved as I have loved her, I could die content."

A quick light shot from Mr. Jordan's eyes.

"If I—" he cried. "But that is more than I dare hope."

"He who dares not wins not," said the happy invalid, turning to Claire, who stood quietly beside the bed, but with her face turned toward the window adjoining. He took her hand in his.

"You can make two happy at once, Claire," he said, in an appealing tone, "and leave my heart at rest."

It was a full minute before she responded to his appeal, a look of involuntary hardness coming into Mr. Jordan's eyes as he stood waiting her response. This was no hasty nor warm lover. He preferred to let the father plead his cause.

"Whatever you wish, father," she replied, at length, her eyes turning with love to his face.

He quietly placed her passive hand in that of the silent lover by her side.

"Let this be your betrothal," he said.

Mr. Jordan clasped his arm softly round her waist, and drew the unresisting form to him.

"If you but confirm the hope which your father has given, dear Claire," he whispered. "If you will indeed be mine."

"I am yours, John," she replied, in a very quiet tone, as she yielded to his embrace.

He lifted her hand gallantly to his lips.

"Nay, nay!" cried Mr. Hamilton, in a more cheerful tone. "Don't be kissing hands. That is not the way we made love when I was young."

Blushing deeply Claire broke from the arm that encircled her and ran hastily from the room.

"After her," exclaimed the father. "A bird that flies that way flies to be followed."

Mr. Jordan was quick to take this hint, and left the invalid with a very happy expression on his face. This, however, was soon replaced by a pale, exhausted look. He had much overtasked his strength.

Meanwhile the fowler had followed his bird in vain. She was nowhere to be found.

We, more successful than the accepted suitor, will follow Claire Hamilton too, in her flight from the close air of the sick-room out into the soft summer atmosphere.

Leaving the hotel, with no change of dress save a hat and a light shawl, she walked rapidly up the main avenue of the mountain town, a flush upon her cheeks, and her mental excitement showing itself in her rapid, nervous walk.

Leaving the main street she turned into a side avenue, and passed for some distance through a lane of cottages, fragrant with the scent of flowers that bloomed in their front yards.

She had soon passed the built-up portion of the town, and found herself beside a small stream that flowed toward her through a quiet meadow.

Here she paused from her excited walk, resting her hand on the limb of a low willow, and looking down, with troubled eyes, into the placid stream.

For five minutes she stood thus rousing quickly at length, as she heard a step behind her. Half-turning, Clai drew slightly aside to let this person pass. As she did so, she glanced back over her shoulder.

It was with a violent start that she found herself gazing into the face of George Howard, who had paused, with a quiet, but downcast look, before her.

"You! And here!" she cried, impulsively, clinging to the branch for support. "I thought—I heard you were—"

"In prison," he supplied her hesitating utterance. "I was to be tried for a crime which I never committed; doomed, perhaps in advance."

There was a look of settled gloom on his features as he spoke.

"But—you are here!" she exclaimed. "You have not been tried?"

"I did not wait for the farce," he quietly replied. "I found a quicker mode of release from prison."

"You have escaped—you have broken jail!"

"That is what they call it," he responded. "Innocence is not so sure of redress that it is safe to await the action of legal justice."

She looked at him, incredulously. Evidently she did not credit his claim of innocence.

"But, what brings you here?" she exclaimed, with quick alarm, looking hastily around. "And by way of the town, too! Fly, sir! You will be captured! I would not have you undergo the pain and disgrace of a trial and conviction."

This last sentence was spoken half in apology for her impulsive tone.

"I wished to see you," he said, pleased at her manner. "I could not longer rest without seeing you, whatever the danger. I cared not what the world might think, but could not live without a vindication in your eyes."

He spoke rapidly, and in a tone of deep earnestness. Her clear eyes fixed themselves inquiringly on his.

"I hope—I trust you are not guilty," she replied. "I should be too glad to have you vindicate yourself, and to learn how this sad error, if error it is, arose."

Mr. Howard wore a troubled look as she spoke. There was a shade of incredulity in her tone of which she was not herself aware.

"I have been belied," he said. "How, I cannot explain. There are reasons—you shall know them

some day—soon perhaps. But now I am not at liberty to speak."

"And did you risk coming here to tell me this?" was her severe answer, though her eyes looked weakly around, in dread of possible danger.

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "I came here to throw myself on your trust and generosity. To appeal to your old knowledge of and belief in me. Deeper interests than my own are involved in my silence. Not even to you do I dare tell all. But, Claire, you have trusted me before. You will believe me now when I declare myself the victim of circumstances."

"Yet innocence has no need to fly from justice," was her softened rejoinder.

"From justice, no. From law, yes. I have loved you, Claire Hamilton. I love you yet with the deepest feeling of my soul. I would not dare stand before you and tell you this were my soul tainted with crime."

"I doubted you," she replied, in an agitated tone. "I had cause. I hope, and cannot but believe that you are truthful now."

"If I swear it on my love I should be perjured indeed to take that oath falsely!" he fervently rejoined.

"Speak not again of that, George Howard," she replied, drawing her straight form erect before him. "It is too late to recall the past."

"Too late?"

"Yes, I am betrothed to another. The past is dead between us."

Her tone was low but resolute. His startled eyes seemed to read but slight comfort in her face.

"Betrothed? Oh, Claire!"

"To John Jordan."

A strange look came into his face. He turned away with a slow but firm step.

"It is too late indeed. Farewell, Claire. I had hoped, but even hope is dead."

She stood clasping the limb convulsively as her eyes followed his retreating form. Her lips opened as if they would recall him, but no sound came from them. She watched him as he disappeared in the direction of the town, her heart torn by a dozen conflicting emotions.

At length, with a deep sigh, she broke from her constrained attitude, and with downcast eyes and thoughtful brow slowly retraced her footsteps into the town.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALTOONA THREATENS.

"THERE'S everlastin' thunder broke loose now, and no mistake," said Billy Baggage. "The news is just ridick'lus. I never heered nothin' so ridick'lus."

The train was passing round the Horseshoe bend on the mountains west of Altoona, having just emerged from the tunnel which leads to the startling but magnificent scenery of this wonderful curve.

Our hero had left his usual station in the baggage-car, and had made his way forward to the engine, where he greeted his father, and Jack Blut, the engineer, with the above observation.

"Hello, midget," cried Jack, jocularly. "What is it has give way? I don't see as the safety-valve says anything."

"That's just what's the matter," replied Billy. "There ain't no safety-valve to let off the public steam, and so there weren't nothin' left but an explosion. The b'l'r's bu'sted into smithereens, that's all."

"What's all this about, Billy?" asked his father, severely. "I'd give something nice if you wasn't so fond of making a monkey show of yourself."

"Think I'm blowin' then, pop, do you?" was Billy's unmoved rejoinder.

"I dunno as you're blowin'," said his father, satirically. "But it's never quiet weather long after your nose shows itself."

"There's thunder loose this time, anyhow, and reg'lar brimstony thunder, at that," replied Billy.

"What is it, Billy, boy? Let it out or get out," queried Jack.

Billy seated himself on the side of the tender, his feet hanging, as it seemed, over the awful gorge on whose extreme edge the engine appeared to hang.

"In course you've heered of the B. and O. strike?" asked Billy.

"Sartain. We haven't been living up at the North Pole, or nowheres where people knows nothing," said Jack.

"Well, it's got wuss, and mighty wuss. The trains is stopped, right and left. The men won't work theirselves, and won't let nobody else work. The canal boatmen are in the ring, and there's been a scorchin' old riot in Baltimore. There's hot times now, you bet."

"Is it so, sure shot, Billy? Or is this one of your yarns?" asked his father, incredulously.

"Sure! I rayther think so. Why, they called the home guards out, and there was some shootin'. And there was just the smartest chase after the militairy you ever heerd on."

"Thunder!" ejaculated Jack. "Things is coming to a p'int. But that's out of our diggings. Penny's quiet all along the line."

"Not much," was Billy's laconic rejoinder.

"Aha!" cried his father. "The lad's news-bag ain't empty yit, Jack. When you see that flash in Billy's eye you can know there's something coming. Out with it, boy. What's loose on our road?"

"Turpentine, and coal ile, and nitro-glycerine," returned Billy. "Everything that'll blow up and bu'st up. There's fun out, high old fun, and it's jis beginnin'. Keep your eyes skinned if you don't want to be astonished, wuss than ever a balky mule was with a pack of fire-crackers tied to its tail."

Billy had got up from his perilous position, and was dancing over the coal heap in a state of great excitement. He seemed to enjoy the fun in prospect. Ere the boy expected it the equally excited engineer had him by the collar and was shaking him as if he would shake him out of his coat.

"Blame your young skin, you're enough to give a chap the brain-fever with your excruciating long ways of getting round Robin Hood's barn. Just promise to tell a straight story or I'll shake every tooth loose in your head."

"That's right, Jack," said Jacob Baggage, approvingly. "That's about the only way I can straighten the quirks in his brain. Out with it now, Billy, 'cause Ja'k Blunt's a hard one to fool with."

"Ye-es, I'm a tr-tr-tryin' to do it," stammered Billy, between the shakes. "But g-good gr-gracious, a feller can't t-talk in an earthquake."

"Then out with it," cried Jack, setting the boy down. "And none of your roundabout twistifications."

Billy too't advantage of his liberty to make a flight to the rear end of the tender, where he perched himself, looking triumphantly back at his foes.

"None of that, Billy," exclaimed his father, angrily. "If you run off that way I'll cut you off in my will with a shilling; blamed if I don't!"

"And whereabouts will you git the shilling, pop?" asked his unterrified son. "You'd best begin to save up."

"Come, come, Billy," coaxed Jack. "Let's hear it out, boy."

"Ain't I been tellin' you fur a good fifteen minutes?" replied Billy. "The Pennsy boys has struck ag'in the doubling up; that's the news. There's th'under at Pittsburgh, and lightnin' at Altoona, and a blazin' o'd row at Harrisburg. It's goin' east like fun on a telegraph wire; and it'll strike fire at old Philly next."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Jack, in great excitement. "I'm glad the boys has got so much fight in them. I'm a striker, too, right from the shoulder. Where did you get all this news?"

"Picked it up from the conductor. It was just telegraphed to the last station we passed. They swear they won't let a freight train leave Pittsburgh for love or money."

"Who won't?" asked his father.

"The strikers. And that's everybody and the cook."

"I'm just glad to hear there's so much backbone left in them," replied Jack, slapping one hand vigorously into the other.

"Well, I ain't, then," returned Billy, in a very sharp and decided tone. "I'm not the chap to go back on the bridge that's carried me over the creek. The Pennsy's paid me all it's promised, and ain't axed more from me than it's paid fur. And fur Kurnel Tein Scott, he's a gentleman, every inch of him. And just as sure as my name's Billy Baggage I'm goin' to stick by the road. I don't keer a shot if the very brakes and smokestacks strike; I'm a-goin' to hang on while there's a finger-nail left."

With this very decided expression of opinion Billy made his way back through the train, which soon after drew up at Altoona.

Our young friend, with his usual uneasiness, was off the train and taking a breather up and down the long, flagged platform of the station ere the train had quite come to a halt.

He was quickly attracted by what appeared to be an unusual excitement in this center of the Pennsylvania Railroad workshops. Crowds of men were collected, gathered in knots here and there, and excitedly discussing some absorbing topic of conversation.

As the train stopped these men gathered closely round it. Particularly about the engine they swarmed, eagerly talking. Billy pressed closely to the skirts of this crowd, which seemed composed of hundreds of excited individuals, their arms wildly gesticulating, their voices loud and even threatening, to all appearance a mob of unemployed workmen.

"What in the world is the use of letting the passengers go and stopping the freights?" said one coarse individual. "This doing things by halves is the biggest fraud out. Stop all or none, that's my notion."

"And 'tain't without sense," responded a blear-eyed fellow. "There's got to be a beginnin'. S'pose we begin here."

"No, no!" cried a more moderate person. "That won't do at all. Things have gone too far now, in my fancy."

"Your fancy be fiddied," returned the blear-eyed speaker. "Tain't base-ball we're playin' now. If we're sound men there won't a wheel turn on this here road till we get our rights."

"You won't get them this way then," retorted the other. "They'll have the military out before two days. Why, men, you'll be shot down like dogs if you keep this up, and you ought to have the wit to know it."

From the expressions of several faces in the vicinity it was evident that many agreed with him. Not so his excited opponent.

"The military!" he repeated, in a tone of infinite contempt. "A set of 'prentice boys, that don't know the barrel of a musket from the stock. Do we look like men now that's goin' to back down before home-guards? I guess not much."

"You look like a coon that's never flinch afore a bear-bell; and I don't believe a demijohn of old rye'd ever skeer you out of a week's growth," spoke a shrill, boyish voice on the edge of the mob.

A general laugh followed this shrewd hit at the man's character.

"Where's that sassy boy? If I don't punch his head, shoot me," cried the fellow, angrily, forcing his way out of the throng.

Billy Baggage had no notion of waiting to have his head punched. Diving under a car he came up quickly on the other side, and ran down the track toward the rear end of the train.

There he again crossed to the depot side. Just here there were very few people, the crowd preferring to pay its attentions to the engine.

But Billy soon found something to attract his attention. Four men were carrying a sort of couch across the platform, on which lay a white-haired old man, with very pale and thin face.

The boy in an instant recognized his old friend, Mr. Hamilton. Indeed, just behind him appeared the graceful form of his daughter. Mr. Jordan was carefully directing the motions of the men.

Claire Hamilton's eyes lighted up on seeing the well-known face of the lad. She beckoned him to her.

"I'm mighty glad to see," he ejaculated, "that Mr. Hamilton is goin' to git home. I thought he was past movin'."

"He is a little better," she replied. "The doctor thinks it is safe to make the attempt. He will be so much more comfortable and easier in mind at home."

"That's sure enough," responded Billy. "There ain't no place like home—cept a door-step in hot weather, or a snooze in a locomotive tender. And I s'pose there's people that 'd think a feather-bed more comfo'table than a coal-pile."

Claire laughed at his idea of comfort. But a serious expression came again into her face as she looked at the crowd surrounding the engine.

"Do you think there is any danger?" she asked. "There are such wild reports afloat. Will those men stop the train from going? I am half afraid."

"Stop the train!" responded Billy, with a laugh of great amusement. "You mought as well try to stop runaway hoss with a piece of thread and a chalk buckle. We're a-goin' through, Miss Claire, and don't you be a bit feard. They'll try that on arter awhile, I s'pose. But they ain't got to that p'int yet."

Yet there was trouble in the boy's eye as he watched the difficult process of getting the sick man into the train, where he was made comfortable as possible in a sleeping-car; his daughter and Mr. Jordan in careful attendance upon him.

And the lad's doubts appeared not without cause when the conductor's rope was pulled without response in the moving of the train.

This irate individual at once sprung from the train and ran forward to the engine, using language not very complimentary to the crowd as he pushed his way roughly through them.

Billy Baggage followed very closely in his wake, coming up to the engine immediately behind him. The undecided mob had drawn back from this vigorous movement of the conductor.

To the surprise of the latter he found the engine deserted.

"Where is Bill Blunt?" he cried, fiercely.

"Here!" responded the engineer. "I'm not a-takin' this engine through. I'm not a-going back on the boys if it rots here on the track. If you can pick anybody that wants to run her out of this crowd I don't care; but it won't be me."

The conductor, nonplussed by this defection, tried persuasion on the sturdy striker, but quite in vain.

"Where is the fireman? Where is Jacob Baggage?" he next asked.

"On hand! Allers on hand!" replied that individual, rolling up with a very unsteady gait. "I'm the last represente'r of the Baggages, that's an old Mayflower fam'ly. If you want me to pile on coal I'll pile on coal till the old machine busts to kingdom come."

With a lurch and a hiccup he brought up standing against an unfortunate bystander, who was sent reeling headlong through the throng.

"Well, mayn't I be shot if pop ain't gone and got slewed!" exclaimed Billy, in a tone of infinite disgust. "They've been pourin' whisky into him, Mr. Perkins, and I wouldn't trust him to fling a chunk of coal at a goose."

"Hold up there, Billy, boy," ejaculated his father. "S' that your respect? S' that your love fur your poor old dad? Exposhing of him afore all these gen'lemen?"

"What under heaven is to be done?" queried the despairing conductor. "I will fire myself if there's a man in the crowd will act as engineer."

He waited, but there was no response, except in the form of jeers from the more distant part of the mob.

"See here, boys," cried Billy, indignantly, "this here inlin'e's got to go through. If there ain't a man I'll do it, there's a boy I'll do it. I'm your chap, Mr. Perkins. I'll put her through, or send her kitting."

Billy sprung on the engine as he spoke and grasped the lever.

"You!" ejaculated the conductor, looking at him doubtfully.

"He will blow you up, sure as shooting," cried Billy Blunt, from the crowd.

"You know ten times better than that, Bill Blunt," retorted Billy. "'Cause I'm one of your own 'prentices. There's a sick man on this train, and a gal that's a friend of mine. I'm a-goin' to take them home if I've got to run her through blood."

The train began slowly to move under his hand. Some of the throng seemed inclined to spring on the engine.

"Take the shovel, Mr. Perkins," cried Billy, fiercely. "Split the head of the first man that gets on. These ain't no times to stand 'bout trifles."

The mob apparently thought 'is reflection the better part of valor, and rang back at these threatening words, and the fierce wielding of the shovel by the conductor.

Their speed increased. In a minute or two more they were gliding rapidly away, leaving the threatening mob far in the rear.

"We're all right now, Mr. Perkins," exclaimed Billy. "I'll take her through if there's a mob at every station."

And take her through he did, despite a loud-talking gathering at Harrisburg, leaving Mr. Hamilton off at the station nearest his home, and reaching Philadelphia on time.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE EDGE OF THE VOLCANO.

The first mutterings of the strike, which we have just heard, soon spread and deepened into a war which filled the whole country.

From railroad to railroad it spread with the greatest rapidity, and the striking of hands, stoppage of trains, and gathering of threatening throngs seemed likely to involve the entire carrying business of the country in its perilous results.

It was on the 19th of July, 1877, that the events described in our last chapter occurred. On the evening of the same day, General Latte, then in Philadelphia, was telegraphed concerning the stoppage of the freight trains, and of the determination of the strikers to prevent their running.

He immediately went west, making some ineffectual efforts to disperse the mob, and finally, on the evening of the 20th, telegraphed to General Brinton, at Philadelphia, for additional troops, being satisfied that there was no dependence to be placed on the Pittsburg militia.

But our interest in the matter is of a more personal nature than would be given by further attention to these historical details, and we must devote ourselves to the part taken by our characters in the Pittsburg riots.

Billy Baggage went west again on the 20th, after successfully bringing in his train on the previous day.

There was no attempt at interference by the mob with the running of this train. After their threatening demonstration at Altoona, the day before, they seemed to give up all idea of stopping the passenger trains, and devoted their attention particularly to the freight.

It was an exciting scene in which our friend found himself, after leaving the train in Pittsburg and making his way through the streets adjoining the railroad.

Hans Breitmann accompanied him in this rather difficult walk, for these narrow streets were almost choked up with groups and masses of men, who seemed to have worked themselves into a state of intense excitement.

Threats against the railroad were freely indulged in; and brawny-armed, rough-faced, loud-voiced demagogues did their best to stir up the passions of the mob by the most inflammatory speeches.

Billy, an eager adherent of the road, had hard work to keep his temper at these harangues, and to imitate the phlegmatic docility of his companion.

"See here, Hans!" he ejaculated. "I ain't a-goin' to stand by, and let the road be kicked to death by these jackasses."

"Yust you keeps mum," Hans stolidly answered. "Afore much, sompeody'll pe plugging your head for a vool. An' that won't be so nice, not much."

"They can hear me, if it'll do them any good," returned Billy. "I'm fur the Pennsy, right or wrong, and I don't keep brass fa'thin' who knows it."

"Shut your tinder-box, boy," cried a burly, leather-aproned man near by. "What brings baubies like you, blustering among men?"

"Now don't you be buying me fur a baby," was Billy's vigorous answer. "Cause why, I on't think you'd find it easy to rock me in your cradle."

"Hear the young sprig!" cried the man, with a hoarse laugh. "What shall I do, boys? Wrap him in my apron and give him a dip in the Alleghany!"

"Best toss him on your shoulder, Jake, and lump some of the young conceit out of him," replied a sharp-eyed comrade.

"Come pack, Filly," warned Hans, pulling at his comrade's coat.

"Not if I know myself," returned Billy. "I care fur this old horse-shoe cobbler? I ain't that kind of a hairpin."

There was a general laugh at this, and the blacksmith, with an angry exclamation, attempted to lay hold of his saucy young opponent.

Big as he was he had not fully calculated the capabilities of a boy like our hero. Instead of making an effort to escape Billy plunged headforemost between the legs of the giant. Unfortunately for the latter he was bending forward at the moment. The consequence was he made a headlong tumble to the ground, his arms and legs stretched out, spread-eagle fashion.

Before he could regain his scattered wits Billy had sprung up and danced an impromptu jig on his broad shoulders. As the fallen man began to heave upward, with many a curse and groan, Billy shot nimbly through the mass, calling out to Hans:

"Come ahead, Dutchy. Tain't healthy there. I wouldn't stay, if I was you, til that rusty old hammer-rattler gets on Lis pine ag'in."

The crowd laughed good-humoredly, as it opened to let the boys through. There was evidently little sympathy for the fallen champion.

In a little while more our brace of young friends came out of the contracted streets onto the wide space occupied by the numerous railroad tracks.

Here lay hundreds of baggage-cars stretching in long trains over seemingly miles of track. Attached to them were numerous engines, with drawn fires, mounted guard over by groups of men of a different caliber from those whom the boys had encountered in the streets.

These had been idlers, workingmen whose day's la-

Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.

bor was done, storekeepers, women, and a decided sprinkling of boys: *the ala podrida* of the streets of manufacturing town. These were men of one profession, and with a common purpose in the lines of their resolute faces. They were the railroad men, the strikers, who had declared that no trains should move until their grievances were righted, and who were quietly, but effectually keeping their word.

It was a striking scene. On either side, the lofty hills, which inclose Pittsburg, rose at a sharp angle, to the height of several hundred feet, crowned on their tops with the streets of a loftier city, or, on the more distant hills, with turreted mansions, that looked, in the evening light, like castles perched upon their storied crags.

From the city behind ascended long columns of dead black smoke, which spread out and mingled by the light wind, hung like a pall over the devoted trains, shot through by the rays of the descending sun with long, lurid gleams. The whole scene seemed prophetic of the terrible acts soon to be played upon that quiet stage, and these men the actors, who waited but the raising of the curtain for the playing of their startling parts.

"If this ain't fun, I dunno what fun is," said Billy, with little thought in his young soul of what was in the near future. "Sure's you live, there's Jack Blunt 'mong them strikers. Spected to find him there, though, arter yesterday."

"An' dere's old gum-drops, what I calls him," remarked Hans, pointing in another direction.

"Harry Bodkin, by gum!" ejaculated Billy. "Come away, Hans. I'm scared I'll git sussey if I go talkin' with these men."

"You n't much like him now?" asked Hans, as they turned in another direction.

"Never did," replied Billy. "I've been duberous of him for a good while, now. When I got carried off in that trunk I thought Harry Bodkin helped the robbers."

Hans said nothing, but appeared to keep up a wonderful amount of thinking. They halloot got much further ere Billy grasped his companion nervously by the shoulder.

"Hold your horses, Dutchy!" he cried, "and give a feller time to breathe. Jist uss your peepers to advantage now."

"Don't see nix," returned Hans, "but smoke, and cars, and peebles."

"It's Pop Baggage, or I don't know a butterfly from a hornet! And I be he's got a load of whisky aboard that'd freight the biggest of them cars till the axles squealed."

Hans looked round to see advancing toward them, by a path that seemed twice as wide as it was long, the familiar form of Jacob Baggage.

"Now look a-here, pop," exclaimed Billy, walking resolutely up to his father, "what I'm wantin' to know is if you're with them strikers?"

"Wish I on'y knew, da-hed if I don't," mumbled the inebriated man. "S'pose that's what I'm here for. But I'd like ter know."

"It's only rum then. It ain't dishonor to the Baggage fam'ly," said Billy, in a ton' of relief. "I'd like you to 'spain next wha size of a whisky barrel you've been bathin' in."

"In the old Monne-Monnegahaley," muttered Jacob.

"I thought so. It's the Monongahaley river that runs past this town. And that's what they call the whisky arter. I knowed it weren't nothin' less than a rouse that got him so sweatin' full. File right, pop. Me and Dutchy's goin' to march you off the field, like so many Pittsburgh militairy, that allers marches the wrong way abou'."

"You go ter grass," hiccupped Jacob. "I've got this car ter tend, an' I'm goin' ter tend it till I d — i' spide."

"I couldn't keer to be too close by if you explod' it now," said his dutiful son. "Come on, pop. You've got to have this whisky sweatend out of you, and jne the temperance society ag'in. It's the railroaders made you drunk, and I'm goin' to fetch you back to your sober senses ag'in, or melt a-tryin'."

It was no light task the two boys had undertaken, however. Jacob was in a glorious trim for building worm fence; but marvelously unfit for describing straight lines; and just as perverse as Paddy's pig, that could only be got in one direction by making believe to drive it in the opposite.

By the time then that Billy had got his precious parent to bed in a small Pittsburg hotel they had traveled at least three times the requisite distance, and exhausted an amount of patience sufficient to build a very imposing monument to this useful virtue.

CHAPTER XXV.

A RIOT TO ORDER.

"Wish this bit of work were only put through," remarked Billy, as he and Hans walked leisurely through the Pittsburg streets on the next day. "There's lady friend of mine 'bout to be spliced, and I've got an inverted to the fun. But there can't no siddin' now."

"What's spliced?" asked Hans, curiously.

"Why, tied up without ropes; jist tumbled in love and tryin' to git cured of it, you know. And I'm feared she'll git cured mighty sudden."

"Dat's all French, Pilly. I don't know nix what you means," answered the perplexed Dutchy boy.

"Why, married, that's what," said Billy, restily, "and you know no more English than a b'ble. The lady I took on from Altoona, with her sick dad, Miss Claire, I mean. Well, she's goin' to be spliced next Monday to that queer chap, Jordan."

"So quick as dat, Pilly!"

"Yes. Mr. Hamilton's duberous he's goin' to peg

out-die, you know. He wants the weddin' fixed sure afore there's a funeral."

"Ou! yaw. I see now," remarked Hans, with an air of intense satisfaction. "Der lady's to po married, and den he's to go dead. Den dere'll po a funeral. Yaw, dat's goot," and Hans laughed as if greatly amused.

"It's a thunderin' good joke," replied Billy, in disgust. "Only I don't jist see where the funny p'int comes in."

"Tain't everypoty can," returned Hans, still laughing.

Billy subsided into contemptuous silence, and led the way from the quiet streets in which they had been walking toward the center of excitement. It was not many minutes before they found themselves in the vicinity of the railroad depot, and in the heart of a gathering mob.

There was one thing which the keen-witted boy soon observed, which did not give him any high hopes of a speedy termination of the troubles. This was a decided fraternization of the Pittsburg militia with the people. Composed principally of the working classes as they were, it was evident that there was no dependence to be placed upon them.

The crowd of excited people, however, seemed just now to have a special source of excitement, with which they were lashing themselves into a fury. Billy and Hans pressed close up in order to gather the source of their energetic utterances.

"We'll have to show them that the Iron City ain't to be handled with silk gloves," fiercely remarked a sharp-eyed, thin-faced man, who formed the center of an interested throng. "If their holiday soldiers come here, we'll take the starch out of them."

"You're right there," cried several in the crowd.

"We are not going to let the Philadelphia home-guards walk rough-shod over us."

"Not if you are men," remarked the first speaker. "And take one piece of advice from me, friends. Don't fight with stones against bullets. It's not a fair show."

"Let them try that on if they dare," replied a voice in the crowd. "Lead for lead, I say."

"There's not a railroader in the whole kit, Hans," said Billy to his friend. "That chap's bound to stir up mischief. I wish I could git a better squint at his face."

The boys maneuvered for a better position, and in doing so found themselves on the edge of another crowd, in which even louder talk was going on.

A tall, broad-shouldered fellow seemed the principal orator here. He had his back to the boys, but Billy was strongly attracted by something familiar in his figure and dress.

"I don't keer what man it is," he was energetically saying; "I don't keer if he flings the hammer or the file, if he's at home at a switch or in a rolling-mill. It's every man of you workingmen that's to be tramped down by this bloody railroad monopoly, and to be shot down where you won't be put down. But I've a notion that you're not the men to stand it."

The burly speaker, at this point in his oration, turned round, so as to face the other portion of his audience. Billy caught one quick glimpse of his features, and gripped the Dutchy boy's arm with a force that made him wince with pain.

"Hush, Hans! Don't say a word," Billy earnestly whispered. "If I ain't hooked the biggest fish out, then sell me."

"What kind of fish, Pilly? I see nix fish, nohow."

"It's a cross 'twixx a whale and a shark," replied Billy. "Hold still, boy. I want to see that other chap closer."

Working his way through the crowd, our hero got within short eyesight of the street orator, who was just then indulging in some vehement opinions concerning monopolies in general, and the Pennsylvania Railroad in particular.

When Billy returned again to his waiting friend there was a very significant grin upon his expressive face.

"They're nailed; sure as shootin'!" he ejaculated. "If we ain't in clover to-day, then there weren't never a bee suck'd honey. Keep your eye skinned, Hans. We must watch them two men sharper than ever a hawk watched a stray chicken."

"Dem men! Which? Der speakers?"

"Jist so. Them's them."

"But dem's who? Dat's what?"

"Halloo! old stupi1. Don't take yit, hey? Why, the Communists. The Rights-of-Men chaps. The murderer's crew that hung Joe Blizzard, and flung the train over at the bridge. That tall one's big Hughey that helped steal the trunk. T'other was the red-headed chap we followed through the snow. I know the pair of them; and there's a pile of money on their heads for the fellers that nabs them."

It was not long before the orators left their hearers. They did not appear to be acting in concert, yet Billy observed that they kept within sight of each other, and that they stopped at each separate group of men to indulge in inflammatory orations.

"If they spli1, Hans," said Billy, "I'll take big Hughey for my game. You kin spot t'other chap. And mind your eye, boy; fur if you let him fling you I'm a-goin' to comb your hair, lively!"

The two men thus followed seemed to have a very definite object in view. This was to arouse the passions of the mob, and to prepare the way for a violent demonstration against the road and the expected military force.

This quiet pursuit of the boys had continued for about half a mile when our quick-witted young friend made another startling discovery. He continued for some distance further without saying anything, then remarked in a cautious tone to Hans:

"Fling your eye over your left shoulder, Dutchy, back to the corner of the big warehouse. See if you

don't spy a tall, stoutish chap? He's a good-looking feller, with a mustache, and striped legs to his pants. Don't let him see you lookin'."

"Yaw," said Hans. "He's dere."

"The fun's gettin' deeper, then," replied Billy. "That's the coon that bu'sted jail. That's George Howard. What the thunder he wants trainin' these Communists, gits me."

"How you know dat?" asked Hans.

"I seen him. Been watchin' him these ten minutes, 'through the back of my head.'

"Nein!" cried the Dutch boy, in vigorous dissent. "Dat's all big nonsense. How you see through your head, hey?"

"If I told you how to do it, Dutchy, you'd be as smart as me; and I guess you're smart enough now," replied Billy, gravely. "He's arter them, there's no rubbin' that out. And if it ain't a queer job I'll guy in. Set a rogue to watch a legge, they say. Keep your eye on him, Hans. I'm scared he'll know me."

"How's dat, hey?" queried Hans. "Keek my eye on dat man in front, an' on dat man Lohint. Now dat's anudder big nonsense. Ain't got mix eyes in back of my head."

"Look round, now and then," explained Billy. "I'd guy a cow to know what Howard was arter. One of big Hughey's partn's was hung, and t'other r'st of Maybe Hughey's p'kin to be ventilated. With ill-and-three pair of eyes now."

As they proceeded down the line of the railroad the crowd rapidly increased. It was very evident that the railroad men formed the smallest portion of it. It was composed chiefly of unemployed workmen, and of men who had finished their Saturday's work, and joined the mob on their way home.

They seemed hot and bitter against the railroad authorities, and formed very if fan'nable material for the fire-brand orations of Hughey and his associates, and of other similar demagogues who were actively engaged in other parts of the excited mass.

It looked very much as if a concordant effort was being made to stir them up to deeds of violence.

Much was being said about the troops, and fierce threats uttered against them. Billy had seen no troops and ventured to ask what they meant.

"The Philadelphia militia," answered the man asked. "They have been in at the Union depôt this hour. I hear they are marching down Liberty street."

He had hardly spoken before the head of the column appeared, preceded by the sheriff's posse, behind whom the gleam of muskets was visible.

It was a dangerous march for these few hundreds of untried men. The wide space of the railroad tracks, the adjoining streets, the steep hills that overlooked the road, were alike filled with a dense mass of men, whose hell-gent disposition was shown in jeers and defiance of the troops, and an obstinate refusal to move when ordered.

Billy had forced himself through the very heart of this mass, and was now within arm's length of Hughey, who had in some mysterious manner become possessed of a musket, which he brandished above his head as he called upon the mob to resist.

The troops now filed out upon the track at Twenty-eighth street, forcing the mob back until two tracks were cleared.

General Binton, in command of the troops, finding it impossible to force his way further, now ordered his men to "charge bayonets."

This was the spark that set fire to the inflammable tempers of the people. Big Hughey's musket, which he was roughly handling, went off in the air. As if this were a signal a shower of stones was instantaneously rained upon the troops, followed by several pistol-shots. A number of the militia were seen to fall.

Big Hughey, with reloaded musket, now stationed himself in the corner of a side alley, from which he fired point-blank at the troops, loudly urging the men surrounding to clean them out.

"Kill every mother's son of the hounds!" he yelled. "We'll show them the kind of metal there is in Pittsburg."

At this moment the soldiers began firing back, at first with a dropping shot or two, and immediately afterward with general volleys.

Numbers of men fell in the mob, at this point blank discharge, while the rest scattered and fled in every direction.

"Rally, you cowards!" exclaimed Hughey, fiercely. "Are you goin' to let a handful of soldiers drive you like sheep? Rally, and pelt it into them! Give them as good as they send!"

He sprung up as he spoke on a horse-block, and took murderous aim at the line of soldiers. Some one would certainly have fallen by that bullet but that Billy Baggage, who stood just behind him, jostled his arm as he pulled the trigger.

The bullet flew high above the heads of the troops.

"Curse the awkward b'ound that done that!" yelled the giant, turning back with a face infuriated with rage.

At that instant there was the sharp crack of a musket in reply. The exposed man clapped his hand suddenly to his breast and tottered on the stone to which he had leaped.

"I've got it! I've got it hard! Revenge me, boys," he cried, as he fell heavily backward.

A dozen arms were outstretched to receive him.

"Right through the breast," exclaimed Billy, as he saw the blood oozing through the wounded man's shirt. "Poor fellow! Who'se shall we take you?"

"Take me where I can be doctored," replied Hughey, lying limp in the hands of his supporters.

The firing had ceased. The troops held their ground. The scattered shreds of the mob were slowly returning.

The man who had Hughey bore him slowly down

the alley, and to a drug store near by, where his wound was examined and dressed.

"Poor devil! I'm afraid he has got his last sickness," said the doctor, on leaving the room. "The ball seems to have touched the lungs. Get him quickly to his home, men. Make him comfortable as you can."

They obeyed, receiving low-spoken directions from the wounded man. It was a small inn, not far away, to which they carried him. One of the most assiduous of his followers was our friend Billy, who was bent on tracing his quarry home.

Hans had long since disappeared, as Billy supposed, on the track of the second agitator who had been delegated to his watchful care.

"And as two boys can't well go three ways at once, I suppose George Howard's clean guy us the sirs," thought Billy, as he turned away.

What was his surprise, on looking round, to see near him the person just then in his thoughts, closely surveying the house to which big Hughay had been taken.

"Alas! 'The Chosen' is in the field again," surmised Billy. "Anyhow, Hughay is past being vented by them, that's some comfort."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ASSAULT ON THE ROUND-HOUSE.

The night that followed these stirring scenes was one of sleeplessness to all parties concerned, and of incisive alarm and excitement.

The Philadelphian troops had retired from their exposed position to the railroad round-house, placing sentries to guard the adjoining offices.

With these sentries the mob soon came in contact, two of them being wounded by scattering shots. The windows of the offices were broken by musket-shots, the iron gates to the yard forced in, and indications displayed of an attack in force on the round-house. This was repelled by some musket-shots from the besieged troops, and by the running out of the two Gatling guns which they had with them. The attacking party dispersed from before the terrible visages of these destructive warlike engines.

So the night went through, the harassed soldiers scarcely getting a wink of sleep, and almost destitute of provisions.

The first hours of that eventful Sunday found both parties on the alert, the infuriated mob closely besieging the round-houses, and quite preventing the entry of provisions or aid from without.

As for Billy Baggage, with whose share in the business we are more particularly concerned, he was on the hill of battle long before daylight, refreshed by a sound night's sleep and a hearty breakfast.

He met Hans near the Union depot, and his first demand was:

"Got your man holed, Dutchy? You know the rations I promised you if you let him slide."

"Whic' of der mams?" asked Hans, backing from his energetic friend. "Dere was two I had ter see. One backward, and one forward."

"And I bet a cow's horn you didn't see nef'er her."

"Neh," returned Hans, with vigorous gesticulation. "While I was looking for der one, der t'other went. An' while I was looking for der t'other, der one went. An' den I looked for der both, and dere weren't none. An' en den the crowd comed in, and der snooting; you knows."

"Oh, yes! I know!" responded Billy, with supreme contempt. "I know the kind of a coon you are. You'd like me to have three pair of eyes, and two pair of legs, I promised to comb your hair, Hans Bruckmann."

"Yust you keeps away, dat's all," cried Hans, barking belli-ciently.

"Look at the little fightin'-cock!" laughed Billy, in great amusement. "I shouldn't wonder if he would be game for a round ortwo. But tain't wuth while scratching a feiler's nose 'cuse nature nin't put no brains into his head. Tain't his fault, I pose. Come on, Hans. I won't hurt you."

Hans obeyed this invitation very gingerly, keeping a good arm's-length from Billy. This peace-offering seemed too sudden to be trustworthy.

"Got two of them holed myself," continued Billy. "George Howard and big Hughay. Likely we'll find the other speachifying to the mob. That is, if he ain't got a dose of the same lead pills that sickened Hughay."

They were soon in the heart of the mob, working their way forward as only two boys can, darting under arms and legs in a way that disturbed the equilibrium of more than one individual, until their pathway was paved thick with the curses and threats of the jostled citizens.

Little cared Billy for all this, as he made his way, with Hans close at his heels, to the vicinity of the scene of the siege, the threatened round-house rising dark and deserted-looking in front, the dense masses of the swaying mob filling all the surrounding space.

During the early morning the gun-shops had been broken into, and their contents distributed among the besiegers, who had also captured the guns of Knapp's battery, and one of Hutchinson's. The slaughter occasioned by the firing of the military on the previous day had utterly infuriated the people, and the boys heard threats on every side about them that not one of the beleaguered soldiers should go home alive, and that they should be burned out if the assault failed to dislodge them.

At this moment the crowd around the boys was disturbed and forced back by the onward surging of another portion of the mass. There seemed to be something heavy in their midst, which they were dragging onward to the front.

In a few minutes more they opened and revealed the object to be a twelve-pound cannon, which they had placed less than a hundred yards from the

round-house, and trained it directly upon that devoted building. At this juncture the quiet-seeming edifice awakened, in a demand on the crowd surrounding the gun to disperse.

On their defiant refusal to do so a volley belched forth from the dark walls of the fort-like building. Its effect was terrible. A chorus of screams and cries arose and when the smoke had blown aside it was found that no less than eleven of the besiegers had fallen, dead or wounded.

At this dreadful punishment the others hastily fled back, not venturing to remove the victims of the fire until they had gained permission of the military to do so.

"This is hot, Hans," said Billy, cautiously. "Suppose we drop back a bit. Taint our fight, you know, and there's not a lit of use in us stopping stray bullets."

Hans appeared to think the advice as choice a bit of common sense as he had ever heard from Billy's lips, and they quickly retired from the almost deserted, exposed spot which they had occupied.

They were now in the midst of the men behind the gun. A daring fellow was just advancing, with the hope of being able to discharge it before being seen. He reckoned ill on the vigilance of the soldiers, however. The night was light enough to render him plainly visible, and there came a sharp rifle report from the round-house, just as he was about to lay his hand on the gun.

With a deep groan of pain the baffled volunteer fell prostrate.

A considerable time elapsed before any one ventured to repeat this perilous experiment. The body of the fallen man lay there, quite inert, and, to all appearance, lifeless, in dread warning to any further such daring attempt.

Finally, from out of the fuming mass, another started forward, creeping so that his form was barely visible on the shadowy surface of the ground.

He reached the gun apparently unobserved, and with foolhardy daring raised himself erect, swinging his cap defiantly in the air. This proved a dangerous defiance. A rifle-shot cracked again from the gloom-enveloped round-house, and with a cry of pain the fellow turned and ran hastily back, the arm which had waved the cap hanging helplessly by his side. He had got a rifle bullet through the exposed arm.

"Well, I wouldn't buy that gun for the price of old bones, if I had to take it away from there," remarked Billy, in a soliloquy.

The crowd seemed largely of the same opinion, for a half-hour passed without another volunteer.

The day seemed now not far from its dawning. A dim line of light marked the far eastern sky, and the shadows of the night began to grow less dense.

At this juncture the babble of talk, orations, and threats, which had swelled to a hubbub in the crowd, was broken into by the tones of a keen, loud speaking voice, that seemed at once familiar to our young friend, Billy.

"Is there not a man among you," it said, "that dare fire that gun? Half of you are old soldiers, and not the men to let a handful of boys overawe you. If you can't do it, then let a hundred rally to the gun. You can give them iron balls for their leaden bullets."

"By gum, Hans," whispered Billy, "there's your man ag'in. There's the Communisticker."

He was right. It was that passionate demagogue, again blowing up the embers of the fire he had kindled. But the assailants were not so easily to be put into the traces.

"That's good preaching," cried one, contemptuously. "Now let's see your practice. You've been blowin' these two days now. It's all very well for us to pull your chestnuts from the fire. Let's see you fire the gun, or die trying."

He was as good as his word. Not attempting to creep, as the last man had done, he sprang boldly forward, and in a minute stood beside the gun, a small, but erect and defiant figure.

His hand was on the lanyard of the gun. The lookers-on held their breath in the deepest suspense. For that one moment their very hearts were stilled in the intensity of nervous excitement.

Then again came the sharp report of the rifle. But this time the aim had been less true. The man stood unharmed.

There was a new excitement for the crowd. Simultaneously with the shot a second figure broke from the front of the dense mass of people and ran boldly forward.

To his utter surprise Billy recognized the well-known figure of George Howard.

"Well, if this don't beat gambling!" he muttered, between his teeth. "Is he goin' to help the other fire the gun? Is all 'The Chosen' in the ring ag'in' the soldiers?"

But Howard's object appeared to be different.

"Don't fire!" he exclaimed, waving his hand toward the round-house. "This man is my prisoner! I arrest him on the charge of murder! The law must deal with him!"

He had his hand on the shoulder of the Communist, who turned on him a face livid with rage.

"Traitor!" was hissed from between his set lips, as he seemed to be fumbling in his breast for a weapon.

But the warning to the soldiers came too late. Again from the round-house darted a gleam of flame, again came the sharp report of a rifle. The action of the Communist was changed to a convulsive clutch of his breast. He turned half-round, and then fell prostrate on his face, with both arms extended above his head.

"Dead!" came earnestly from Howard's lips. "He has cheated the gallows!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE "CHOSEN."

At this startling and tragic termination of the attempt to arrest the would-be gunner a hush of wonder fell upon the crowd. All was still in the direction of the round-house. The soldiers had evidently caught Howard's words, or the meaning of his daring action, and forbore to fire.

Howard had leaned for a moment over the form of the fallen man, as if to satisfy himself that he was indeed dead. But Billy, who was in a good position for observation, noticed when he removed his hand from the breast of the slain man it contained some small object. The keen-witted boy at once divined that he had taken something from a breast-pocket of the Communist.

George Howard walked deliberately back to the crowd, as if equally heedless of possible bullets from the soldiery, and of the angry looks and threatening words which were beginning to prevail in the throng.

"Isn't this a high handed sort of business?" one man hotly asked. "Is this fellow a spy, or traitor, that has mixed among us?"

"He's a railroad agent. The gun would have been fired only for him. And see, he cost our friend his life."

These, and other angry remarks, were raising a feeling that might have made Howard's position the reverse of comfortable. It would have taken little more to have made the maddened rioters precipitate themselves upon him, and rend him limb from limb.

Howard seemed to appreciate the danger in which he stood, and the wolf-like blood-thirstiness of an infuriated mob. He stopped stock-still, and coolly surveyed the threatening faces for a moment.

"Do you know who that man was that lies dead back yonder?" he asked.

"No. He is one of us," came from various lips.

"You are honest men. I hope?"

"We would like to see the man that dares say we are not," responded a brown-faced old man.

"If you are, then why do you claim friendship for murderers? That man is a fugitive from justice and the law. He is responsible for the deaths of at least two men, and the injury of many others. It was he who cut the bridge near Lewistown last winter, and wrecked an express train. I don't know how many more murders he has done. Is this the man you claim for a friend?"

"No, no!" cried the men, with a sudden revulsion of sentiment. "We have nothing to do with murderers."

"Then I am an officer of the law; and that man has only deserved the penalty of his crimes. Of course you do not own such associates."

Howard walked resolutely forward, and the crowd respectfully made way for him, their distrust removed by his bold bearing and his shrewd working on their feelings as honest workmen. They remembered that the dead man had been a stranger to them all, and a sinister-looking stranger at that.

"If that ain't a 'cute dodge, then I don't know beans," said Billy, in an aside to Hans. "But I don't believe it's all gospel as George Howard preaches. I'm a-goin' to follow him, and see where he fetches up. Twixt me and you, Hans, I dunno quite what to make of him."

With some effort the two boys extricated themselves from the thick of the throng, and entered the less densely-packed mass through which Howard was now slowly threading his way.

At this moment the attention of them all was attracted by a loud, excited outcry from the people. A quick surge forward carried our friends with it despite themselves. Looking eagerly forward in the direction of this movement they saw a lurid glare tinged the mists of the early morn with a blood-red glow. The surge of the throng carried them to the end of the street which they had just entered. Gazing forward an alarming spectacle met their eyes.

The fierce rioters had set fire to the long lines of freight-cars which filled the tracks of this part of the road, and the flames were already ascending in long wreaths into the air.

Each of the blazing cars was surrounded by a circle of yelling rioters, who were forcing them down the track in the direction of the beleaguered round-house.

Car after car was hurled down upon the buildings, their inflammable contents, spurs, grain, and merchandise, giving forth an intense heat, and filling the air with a volcanic mass of flames.

There was now a hard fight for life by the military. Amid cries of "Burn them out!" "Down with the murdering hounds!" etc., and the occasional keen reports of firearms, the besieged men succeeded in throwing several of the burning cars from the track, and in extinguishing the flame in others.

But the efforts of the mob finally proved successful. The fire spread from building to building, till finally the round-house itself took fire, the flames spreading so rapidly as to be soon beyond control.

"It's gittin' hot there, Hans. It's gittin' blazin' hot," ejaculated Billy. "I'm afear'd our friends is goin' to git their whiskers scorched if they don't make tracks mighty sudden— But where's George Howard?"

There was no George Howard in sight. He had become separated from them in the movement of the crowd.

"No matter. I know where to lay my finger on him when I want him," said Billy, philosophically. "And I'm kinder anxious to see this out."

Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.

"Yaw. I dinks so too," remarked Hans.

There was evidently some movement in preparation among the soldiers. Billy maneuvered for a better position, and was almost in front of the burning building, when the gates suddenly opened and the head of the line of troops marched out.

The good effects of discipline were evident in this movement. From the smoke and flame of the volcano behind them they marched as orderly as if on parade, line after line, the perilous Gatling guns being placed between the two brigades, which had formed the garrison of the assailed building.

The crowd was evidently taken by surprise, and drew sullenly back, while the troops quietly filed into Twenty-sixth street, and thence eastward by Penn avenue.

We will not follow them in that perilous march, in which the worn-out and half-starved citizen-soldiers were closely pressed by the fierce masses of rioters, and had literally to fight their way, being refused entrance at the arsenal, and never halting till they had left the city six or eight miles behind them.

But our business is rather with Billy Baggage and his companion than with this long and perilous retreat. Leaving the scene of destruction on the railroad, where train after train of cars was bursting into flames, and the spirit of plunder was succumbing to the thirst for indiscriminate destruction, Billy led the way rapidly back into the town.

"Big Hughey's our game now, Hans," he said. "And I wouldn't be afeared to bet a brass dollar that we'll find George Howard somewhere 'bout the same shanty."

The Dutch boy had no reply to make to this shrewd observation, but trotted contentedly along beside his reader companion, satisfied to let Billy think for him as well as talk for him.

They soon reached the small inn to which the wounded man had been taken on the previous day.

"How's the chap that got ventilated yesterday gittin' along to-day?" asked Billy, boldly, of the bar-keeper.

"One hundred and twenty-seven," replied that individual.

"One hundred and twenty-seven what?"

"Folks that's asked that same question to-day," returned the bar-keeper.

"Keepin' count, hey?" retorted Billy. "Chalk us down for two then. Is he alive, or has he kicked the bucket?"

"Just kicking at it," said the grinning bar-keeper.

"We've got some bizness with him," continued Billy. "Friends of hisn, you know."

"So has the man that's in there now."

"Tall, good-lookin', black mustache?" asked Billy.

"That's his photograph."

"We was to ax for him," Billy coolly replied.

"Where's the room?"

"Second story. Just at head of stairs."

Wasting no more words on this short-spoken fellow Billy led the way into the hall, and up the narrow flight of stairs.

As he approached the door at the landing the sound of voices was heard within, through the crack of the partly-opened portal.

"Stand where you are, Hans," whispered Billy. "I want to git closer and hear what's goin' on inside."

He was soon with his ear at the door, without a single conscientious scruple against the sin of eavesdropping. The voices within were now perfectly audible to him.

"I's posse you're one of us," spoke in a feeble tone the rasping voice of big Hughey. "But you ain't in the circle of 'The Chosen.' I have nothing more to say."

"There are none of them left alive," replied the voice of George Howard. "The fight to-day has wiped them all out, except myself and the 'Chosen Master.' I demand from you the name of the 'Master.'"

"On what authority?" demanded Hughey. "Prove that you are an accepted member of the 'Chosen.'"

"By this token," replied Howard, handing something to the dying man, which seemed to Billy to resemble the object he had taken from the dead Communist.

For Billy had advanced his head so far that he was able to see the occupants of the room. He saw, to his surprise, the wounded man take the object with an air of the greatest reverence, and press it to his lips.

"It is enough," he murmured. "I recognize the token."

"Tho' 'Master's' name?" asked Howard, bending his head down to catch the rapidly-enfeebling voice.

The answer came low, but clear and distinct.

"John Jordan."

"Hai!" cried Howard, with an involuntary movement of surprise.

The eyes of the dying man fixed themselves with a look of sudden distrust on his face.

"Have you proof? How shall I accost him?" asked Howard.

"Give him this proof! The proof of a traitor!" cried Hughey, suddenly raising himself on his left arm, and displaying his right hand, from which gleamed the blade of a dangerous-looking knife.

Nothing could have saved the bending form of Howard from the sudden blow aimed at him but the failing strength of the would-be assassin.

His arm gave way beneath him, and the blade was buried to the hilt in the bed-clothing, as he fell backward with a feeble groan, while a deathly pallor overspread his face.

"Dead!" said Howard, placing his hand on the

lips of the prostrate man. "Dead, and all his secrets with him, unless I can find the full proofs on his person. I have played off one of the villains again-t the other well. But John Jordan! Can it be that he is indeed the mysterious leader of this gang of murderers, whom I have been pursuing so long? John Jordan! A man whom I had every reason to suspect, yet never dreamed of suspecting of such crimes as these men have committed."

"If he's that kind of a tent-pin, then you'd best be up and gittin' quick as lightning," exclaimed Billy, bursting into the room.

"Hai! What do you mean?" cried Howard, turning in deep surprise.

"I mean that John Jordan is to be spliced to Claire Hamilton inside of twenty-four hours. If you want to save her you've got to make the biggest headway home, for every telegraph wire's down, and every engine within ten miles of Pittsburg is turning into ashes and old iron."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ON THE HOME TRACK.

GEORGE HOWARD and the two boys hurried rapidly through the streets after leaving the bedside of the dead man.

It was now approaching midday. The streets everywhere were full of excited people, most of them hurrying toward that point where dense clouds of smoke, shot through with the red ting of fire, told of the work of destruction still going on.

There were parties too, men, women and children, hastening in the opposite direction, each with some article of plunder taken from the burning cars.

Never had the Iron City been so alive with excitement, so full of wild deeds to be repented and atoned for in its calmer moments.

"It is a bad business," said Howard, shaking his head.

"Better fur you," broke in Billy. "There won't nobody try to nab you, while all this is goin' on."

"It is an ill wind blows nobody good, you see," returned Howard, laughing. "Come this way, boys. We must try the telegraph office at once."

"No use," replied Billy. "The wires run along the track. They are all down by this time. What's more, this thing's too far gone for the telegraph to fetch it up. They mought think it a dodge."

"What's to be done then?" asked Howard, in momentary perplexity.

"Notthin' short of an engine and a good head of steam will do the work," remarked Billy.

"But how?" returned Howard. "Where is the engine? And if we had it who is to take it through?"

"I's posse you want to save the gal from gettin' spliced to a murderin' vagabond like we're told this John Jordan is?" queried Billy.

"I will kill him before he shall have her!" was the answer, in tones of unexpected fierceness.

"Then we've got to git the engine, that's all," continued Billy. "They're burnin' them up, by wholesale, here in Pittsburg. But Pittsburg ain't all creation, and there's inglines somewhere, that our legs or horses' legs has got to take us to."

"Dat's der talk, Pilly," exclaimed Hans, with enthusiasm.

"You don't see half the difficulties, my boy," said Howard, in a tone of despondency. "Suppose we should find an engine, do you imagine, for a moment, that we would be allowed to take it? And where, in this strike, could the engineer and fireman be found to run it?"

"Here's der engineer!" exclaimed Hans, patting Billy proudly on the shoulder. "Pilly's der boy to run der engine."

"It wouldn't be the first one I've sent spinnin'," said Billy, modestly. "And fur fireman, there's Pop Baggage. He's as sober as a two-year-old by this time. If the two Baggages, Pop and Billy, don't fetch her through, then don't talk."

"But we haven't found the engine, nor the order for its use," remarked Mr. Howard, doubtful in mind as to the possibility of the boy's Utopian scheme. "The best we can do, I fear, is to seek the nearest telegraph office outside the city, and send a message on. If the wires are not down further on?"

"Dey say der wires is cut at Harrisburg," replied Hans.

"We're goin' through by steam," said Billy, positively. "Mr. Cassatt, the vice-president of the road, is at the Union depot. He knows me and I can git an order from him. On bizness of the road, you know," and Billy gave a very knowing wink.

"Hans, you take Mr. Howard to our hotel: the Pine Alley Continental. See that Pop Baggage is as straight as a die. Tell him there's work cut out for the fam'ly. I'll be there soon."

In a minute he was off, like a shot, darting through the thronged streets. Howard looked after him dubiously.

"Is the boy trying a lark with me?" he asked, half to himself.

"Nein! nein!" returned Hans, energetically. "Pilly's no lark. You comes to der hotel. Yust as Pilly says."

Howard, affected by the earnestness of manner of the boys, followed Hans, though half-angry with himself for what might possibly prove a fatal loss of time. They found Jacob Baggage there, sober as a judge, having given Billy his word of honor not to touch, taste, or handle.

Yet they were all impatient enough before the young ambassador arrived, for more than an hour had elapsed since he set out.

"All serene!" he cried. "Let's have our dinner now, pay our bill, and slide."

"You got the order?" asked Howard, with intense eagerness.

"Yes. Had a big job to find Mr. Cassatt. The Union depot is all in a blaze. Goin' into smoke and ashes faster than sin. It's a clance if all that par of the town don't go. There's everlasting lightnin' loose, now I tell you."

"This seems correct," remarked Mr. Howard, examining the written slip of paper which Billy had handed him. "But how in the world you ever got it out of Cassatt?"

"Piled up les bigger than three meetin'-houses, and made him jostle them all," began Billy. Then, with sudden compunction, he continued: "No, I didn't neither. I told him just what was up, and got on the right side of his sort heart. Giv' him yur name, too. I'll show, if he di'n't know you lie a book. Let's go for that dinner. We mought need the eatables afore we git another chance at them."

Howard, despite his impatience, recognized the truth of this caution, and the four made short work of a hearty dinner.

"We've got to git out of this town by way of the hills," said Billy, when they once more found themselves in the street. "It's a river of fire down the railroad way."

A river of fire was no exaggeration to the scene they gazed upon when they had reached the level of the upper town, and looked down upon the wide valley or gorge occupied by the railroad tracks. Miles of freight-cars occupied the numerous tracks, all laden with inflammable freight, and the whole space was now one sheet of lurid flame, from which vast volumes of black smoke rolled up, in wreaths and vortexes, hovering in a dense canopy over the fires of the abyss below.

Inward, toward the heart of the city, the Union depot and its surrounding buildings lent their quota to the terror of the scene, in floods of devouring flame that shot upward as if they would fire the overhanging heavens. It was a scene such as human eye has seldom gazed upon.

"It is fascinating in all its terror," exclaimed Howard, with an involuntary shudder. "The destruction there must be terrible."

They hurried on as rapidly as possible. It was not long before they had left the scene of ruin behind them. When they had proceeded some four or five miles in this direction they descended from the ridge into the valley. Behind them the flame-lit volume of smoke hung like a vast wall, shutting them out from the apparently doomed city behind it. They found themselves near a small hamlet; but it was deserted save by a woman or two, and some children.

"No possible chance of getting a vehicle, here," remarked Howard, after some questioning. "We must trudge on."

The afternoon was rapidly waning when they at length walked into a somewhat larger village, sufficiently removed from the Iron City to have some of its inhabitants left at home.

Here Howard succeeded in procuring a carriage, with a driver to take them to a railroad station where there was some hopes of procuring an engine.

This hope proved fallacious; there was none there. They learned, however, that there was a passenger engine at a station some ten miles further down the road.

"There is nothin' for it," said Billy, with a grimace. "We've got to drive on. I's posse we kin git another hoss here."

"Horses are more plentiful than engines, I fear," remarked Howard, in a tone of nervous impatience. "If we should fail—"

They were away again inside of ten minutes, Howard imparting a share of his energy to the horse, and getting more speed out of a sorry animal than Na'ure seemed to have implanted in it.

Yet, the afternoon was waning rapidly. It was quite six o'clock when they at length drew rein at the depot in a small town, their eyes gladdened by the sight of an engine standing tranquilly on a side track near the station.

"Good luck at last!" screamed Billy, dancing in his exultation. "Good luck allers comes to them as hunt hard fur it. Her fires are out, but it won't take much to set them blazin' ag'in. You take the order in, Mr. Howard."

Howard had not waited for this command. He was already in the depot, investigating the station-agent.

"All right!" he cried, joyfully, when he again appeared. "She will be fired up and ready for us inside of an hour."

"And it's supper-time now, and our journey has made me as hungry as a bear," remarked Jacob.

"Yust so. I feels dat way myself, too," returned Hans.

As there was no more agreeable way of passing the necessary time, Jacob and the two boys proceeded to hunt up the wherewithal of a substantial supper. The impatient lover, however, was in no mood for eating, but stood with dissatisfied eyes, devouring every step of the slow process of firing up the cold engine. Gradually the steam began to show its presence in a slight hiss about the safety-valve.

Howard hastened back to where the others were yet lingering over the pleasures of the table.

"Hurry!" he cried. "Steam is up. We must be off without a moment's delay."

"Sandwiches is goot, Mr. Howard," remarked Hans, invitingly.

"Then bring some in your hat," exclaimed Billy, springing up from the table. "Mr. Howard is right. That weddin' comes off early in the mornin', and we don't know what stoppages we may have to run through."

There was little time lost in getting under way.

In ten minutes more they were flying down the deserted track at a rapid pace. Billy with his hand on the lever, and his keen eye on the track; Jacob hurling the coal upon the new-kindled fires; Howard devouring the distance before them with his eager vision; and Hans lying soberly backward, masticating one of his sandwiches.

"We're goin' to make time," said Billy. "But there ain't none of us wants to go to kingdom come. There's no tellin' what's on the track ahead of us. Don't think we'd best venture on more than thirty miles an hour."

"Will that bring us there in time?" asked Howard.

"If it won't, fifty miles will; and there's that much, easy, in the injine," remarked Billy, calmly.

And down the road, with clatter and clank, rolled on the fire-breathing iron horse.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A PERILOUS FLIGHT.

On through the long summer twilight they ran. On into the warm July night. It was a clear sky that domed above them, studded with multitudinous stars. Past fields that lay dim in the night gloom; past mountain masses that appeared like dense clouds against the horizon; past winding rivers that curved in inky blackness under the shadows of wooded hills. Onward, onward still, into the night, like some terrible winged monster, panted and fled the thundering engine. Yet swiftly as it fled the impatience of the lover sped before, looking forward to and craving for that goal on which the realization or the wreck of his highest hopes hung.

Few words passed between the four travelers, thus thrown together in that long journey. George Howard was too wrapped up in his own thoughts and anxieties to be in any mood for words. Billy Baggage felt the responsibility of his perilous position too deeply, and Hans was too sleepy for any indulgence in talk.

As for Jacob Baggage, he hurled fuel from time to time into the craving mouth of the fire-eating engine, and in the intervals leaned upon his shovel in grimy silence.

For hours thus, thundering over rivers, creeping up mountain slopes, speeding through deserts, flying past half-awake towns, scaring belated travelers as they appeared and vanished, they fled through the silence and shadows of the night, with all the quiet of intense earnestness.

"It is all smooth sailin' here," said Billy, at length, as he added a few more miles per hour to their speed. "If we could only go through at this rate we would have to rap our friends up to breakfast. But this won't do when we git further on. We mought knock thunder out of some train ahead, and git knocked ourselves into kingdom come. And that mought be uncomf'able."

"But the roads are clear of trains. The strike has cleared them," suggested Howard.

"I don't know 'bout that," returned Billy, shaking his head. "The passengers hadn't been stopped when I come through last. And then there's Altoona and Harrisburg. The strike's alive at them places. I'mafeared we mought run afoul of trouble."

"We had better fly past."

"Sartain," said Jacob Baggage. "They can't whistle back an injine at full tilt."

Billy shook his head deliberately, as he sounded the whistle which he had been blowing at intervals of five minutes during their journey.

"Who knows what's on the track at Altoona?" he asked. "Spose there's been a rail tore up? There's no tellin' what a mob mought do. We'll have to feel our way."

"I hope they will be all abed by the time we reach there," said Howard. "Unless the Pittsburgh tidings stirs them up."

"Which it will be sure to," replied Billy.

Up and up the mountains they climbed. Through the tunnel at the summit they passed. Round the Horseshoe bend they curved, and began to descend the downward slope leading to Altoona.

"What is der ret light?" exclaimed Hans, who had risen from his hard bed for a look ahead.

"The danger-signal set!" cried Billy. "Then there's trouble brewin', sure shot."

"We had best stop at the station and inquire," suggested Howard.

Acting upon this suggestion Billy slackened up the speed of the engine as they drew near the red light that threw its alarm signal far along the track.

Coming to a dead halt at the signal station Howard sprang from the engine and entered the small building, where the sleepless operator was keeping watch and ward over the interests of the road.

Reappearing after a minute's absence, he exclaimed:

"We can run ahead; with care. There has been talk of obstructing the road at Altoona; but the operator does not know if it has been done."

"All correck!" exclaimed Billy. "We're a-goin' to save Miss Claire from that hound, or bu'st somethin', that's sure."

He had started the engine as he spoke. George Howard sat back in gloomy silence, with compressed lips and a dangerous look upon his face. John Jordan's villainous scheme was in danger from this indignant lover.

"Spose Miss Claire is really sweet on that feller?" queried Billy.

"That is for her to decide," was the proud answer. "But he shall not wed her under false colors."

"I'm afeard she's got two queer ones to choose between," said Billy, shrewdly.

"It looks that way, Billy," replied Howard. But there was a smile of confidence on his face.

And soon, in the distance, the lights of a city shone through the dark veil of night.

"Altoona," said Billy, briefly, pointing forward. With set lips and throbbing hearts they ran into the perilous city, every eye being bent forward in close scrutiny of the track, while the speed of the engine was gradually slowed until she moved at little more than a walking pace.

The depot lights shone upon a crowd of men, gathered upon the platform and the track, their tones and motions full of excitement as they gazed upon the coming engine.

"Is the coast clear?" asked Billy, his hand upon the lever.

"I can't tell yet," replied Howard. "There seems to be something on the track beyond the men."

In a minute more they steamed into the station, coming to almost a halt. They were instantly surrounded by hundreds of excited men.

"Who is aboard?" "Stop that engine!" "Board her!" and a dozen other exclamations arose, as a half-score of stalwart men flung themselves on the slowing locomotive.

Billy, with compressed lips, still kept his hold of the lever, saying, in a low voice, to Howard:

"Can you make out that thing on the track, now?"

"By Heavens! I was mistaken," came the excited reply. "It is only the heavy shadow of the water tank. The light behind it has thrown it black and solid-looking across the road. Put on full steam, Billy. We must run through, now, if it is through bullets."

Billy looked warily around at the men who were hanging on the engine, striving to clamber in, but preventing themselves by their very numbers.

"Stop her!" cried an authoritative voice. "Some of you men take her out of that young bound's hands."

"Open the fire doors, pop," exclaimed Billy, as if inclined to yield.

Jacob Baggage obeyed without a word of dissent, the hot gleam from the fire luridly lighting up the whole scene, and strongly illuminating the set, resolute faces of those on board the engine.

The crowd hung back an instant, expecting an immediate compliance with their demands.

The next instant Billy had put on full steam, and snatching the shovel from the yielding hand of his father, stood brandishing a shovelful of hot coals from the fire.

"Hands off, every risky mother's son of you!" he shouted. "Let go, or I will scorch you from head to heel!"

He enforced his order by a liberal sprinkling of the burring coals right and left of the engine.

The men who had been clinging to the sides, leaped and tumbled backwards in every form of extreme haste. The engine, at the same moment, under the sudden pressure of steam, leaped forward like a living thing.

"Stoop for your lives!" cried Howard. "They will fire!"

His warning was none too soon. A dozen bullets swept harmlessly over their heads. A derisive laugh was the only answer as they swept onward through the scattering throng, and in a moment more were beyond all danger of stoppage.

"How's dat for high?" roared back Hans, at the baffled mob. "Like ter have some gum-drops, hey? Ten cents a box, fresh un goot."

On into the night again, and the city of peril faded and died out behind them, and the long miles of mountain scenery opened before them.

Onward past sleeping villages, and through towns startled by the now unwanted sound of the steam engine. On along curving miles of the flowing Juniata. On down the banks of the wide and placid Susquehanna. A clock, from some belfry in the State capital, struck the hour of three as they rolled at length into the tranquil streets of Harrisburg.

"We must stop here, no matter what comes of it," said Billy. "Our old lady is getting dry. She must have her drink."

"I hope, then, that the strikers are all safely asleep," remarked Howard, with some anxiety.

It seemed to be so, in fact, when they stopped at length in front of the water-tank. Only two or three men were visible. Billy recognized one of these at a glance, as a faithful servant of the road.

"On official bizness, Jake," the boy cheerfully cried. "Water us up and let us off."

Jake looked suspiciously at the solitary engine.

"What business?" he asked, shortly.

"On Billy Baggage's bizness," replied the imperative boy. "There! Read that. I judge you know Mr. Cassatt's writing."

Jake gazed a moment at the paper handed him.

"All right," he said at length, proceeding to adjust the water-tube and turn on the water from the tank into the empty reservoir of the engine.

During this colloquy George Howard had remained in the background, sitting back in the tender, with his face well shaded by his hat. He did not quite like the light from the depot lantern.

The numbers of men present were gradually reinforced as the minutes went on. At least a dozen persons stood round the engine when at length the water was turned off at the tank.

One of these, a sharp, ferret-eyed personage, gazed keenly into the faces of our four friends.

"Who are you all?" he asked, curiously. "Stand up there, my man with the slouched hat. I would like a closer look at your phiz."

"Start her!" said Howard, in a low tone, to Billy, without heeding this imperative demand.

"Hold there!" cried the other, sharply. "I know you now, my man! It is George Howard! It is the escaped prisoner! On your life don't start that engine!"

Without a moment's heed to this command Billy moved the levers. The life-giving steam passed into the cylinders. In a moment they were slowly moving.

"In the name of the law!" yelled the officer, springing aboard the engine, and essaying to take her control out of the hands of the determined boy.

Then for the first time did George Howard show his true metal. So far he had, with a gloomy indifference, left the direction of affairs in the efficient hands of our youthful hero.

Now he sprung vigorously to his feet and grasped the officer in his stalwart arms.

"I am George Howard!" he cried. "Here is your Harrisburg thief-taker! Catch him, some of you, or he may get a broken neck for his pains."

In an instant the officious officer was flung headlong into the midst of the bystanders. Only some extended arms saved him from dangerous contact with the flagged pavement.

"Put on all steam!" shouted the aroused man. "Come on, the next of you that wants to arrest George Howard!"

But nobody seemed to care to try that perilous conclusion. In a minute more it was too late for interference. The engine had gathered too much speed to be safely boarded.

For the next four hours they ran through a more settled district, where the reckless speed of their previous journey could not be safely indulged in.

Day had long since dawned. Howard's watch pointed to the hour of seven, hundreds of curious eyes had looked with wonder on this solitary engine as it shot through the clustering stations of a thickly inhabited district, ere at length they reached the station nearest the residence of Mr. Hamilton.

"On time! Hurrah for our side!" shouted Billy, triumphantly, as he brought the engine to a dead halt. "We've got a good hour afore the weddin'. Run this machine on the siding, Harry," he cried, to the station-master. "Can we git a carriage here to run over to Hamilton's?"

"No," replied the man addressed. "Got an invitation to the wedding?"

"You bet," was Billy's sententious answer.

"Where are you from?"

"From the Pittsburg blast furnace. Run away with one injine out of the blaze."

"Come with me. There is no time to lose," said Howard, leading off with a rapid step.

The station-master looked curiously after him.

"George Howard, hey? Is he going to attend the wedding of his old sweetheart?"

The three others followed their excited leader, it meditating some exertion to keep pace with him.

In fifteen minutes they were in front of a substantial mansion some distance back from the road. Bidding them wait Howard entered the gateway leading to this house. In about ten minutes he appeared, again driving a high-stepping black horse.

The others lost no time in stowing themselves away in the carriage, and the horse was put at his best paces by the stern-faced and hard-handed driver.

Not another word came from Howard's lips. It was evident by his face that there was a surge of growing passion in his soul. He made no movement but to look at his watch as he drew up in front of Mr. Hamilton's well-known house.

"Eight o'clock!" said Billy, drawing his breath hard. "We're just on the hour."

The horse was drawn up with a strong hand, and Howard sprung with a quick leap from the carriage. In a minute more he had reached the porch of the house, thrown open the door without pausing to knock, and disappeared within.

Billy lost no time in following him, leaving the others to more deliberate movements.

It was a striking scene in which they found themselves. A group of persons were gathered in the large parlor of the mansion. The central figures were Mr. Hamilton, lying, pale-faced, on couch; a wan-faced minister, book in hand; and before him Claire Hamilton in bridal robes, beside the bridegroom, John Jordan. There was a strange look of doubt on the beautiful face of the bride.

"If any one knows cause—" came from the thin lips of the minister.

"I know cause!" cried an imperative voice behind them, excitedly interrupting. "Turn to me, John Jordan! Turn, wretch and murderer, who has dared to peril that pure soul! I will give cause enough."

"Who is this?" cried Jordan, turning with very pale face.

"It is I, George Howard, that denounces you as a murderer! Yes, and as the leader of the deadly band of 'The Chosen'."

With a loud curse the villain drew a pistol and leveled it with deadly aim at Howard.

Claire Hamilton threw herself with a scream before the threatened man, flinging up her arms protectingly.

At the same instant Billy Baggage caught the arm of the infuriated villain. The pistol exploded. But it was John Jordan himself that fell with a deep groan to the floor.

CHAPTER XXX.

GEORGE HOWARD'S STORY.

The scene was a thrilling one. The screams of the women present, the forward rush and exclamations of the men, the fall of the wounded man, all made up a tableau of intense interest.

Howard hurried the unresisting form of Claire from the room, her eyes closed as if they would shut out the horror possessing her. Billy caught up his little friend Lucy, who was screaming with fright, and carried her hastily away. But, strangest of all, the invalid, Mr. Hamilton, in anticipation of whose death this wedding had been hurried forward, sprung involuntarily from his couch, and ran forward with all the energy of a half man.

"My God!" exclaimed the minister. "This is

horrible! He has become the victim of his own murderous attorney!"

It was true. The ball had sped with a deadly aim. Jordan was dead by his own hand.

We will briefly pass over the scenes that followed, the removal of the corpse, the nervous hysterics into which Claire Hamilton was thrown, the general terror and turmoil that pervaded the house. The strangest effect of all was that upon Mr. Hamilton. He had fallen prostrate after his excited movement from his couch, and had been borne insensible to bed. But the intense excitement of the moment had made a radical change in that stubborn affection of the brain with which the doctors had proved unable to cope.

After a long sleep he woke greatly refreshed, and with a decided chance for the better that replaced all fears of his death with strong hopes of his recovery. Strangely enough the self-immolation of his intended son-in-law seemed likely to prove the restoration of life to him.

But we must take our readers forward to an hour in the afternoon of that same day, in which the persons in whom we are chiefly interested were gathered in a smaller room in the Hamilton mansion.

Billy Baggage and his father, of course, were present, the former with little Lucy snuggled up to him as if for protection from the terror that still beset her. Hans, too, was present, but he had snuggled himself up securely in a window corner, where there was an opportunity for a quiet nap, or a repetitive indulgence in gum-drops.

As for George Howard and Claire, they seemed to have arrived at a private understanding, for her face had lost its look of unrest and doubt, and rested on him with a quiet confidence which she had never accorded to Mr. Jordan. Still, the effect of her recent nervous excitement was still upon her, and was shown in involuntary tremblings of the hands and lips, which she strove in vain to repress.

As for Mr. Hamilton, he had insisted on being brought down to the room, and the look of vital interest in his face showed a very different condition from the dull, half-glazed appearance of his eyes before the shock which had so favorably affected him.

"What I want to know is," began Billy Baggage, constituting himself the spokesman of the occasion, "who M. George Howard is, and what he is; fur if I ain't a mighty mistaken little ninny, he's been playin' possum just the worst. Shut my eye up, bad, I know that."

A silent laugh followed this prelude, which was delivered with an energy which showed that Billy felt that he had been badly sold.

"Old Nick is never so black as he is painted," answered Howard. "I acknowledge that I have been playing a part. My tongue has been sealed for several months past. I am free to speak now."

"Since the goin' under of B'g Hughey and his comrade?" asked Billy. "And of—"

Lucy stopped his half-discreet mouth by placing her small hand over it. Her young judgment evidently feared for the nerves of aunt Claire.

"Yes," replied Howard. "It was this that restrained me. There was much rested on my silence, and even on my acceptance of apparent infamy."

"What have you been, then?" asked the feeble voice of the invalid. "If not a criminal, what?"

All ears listened eagerly for the answer. Billy in his anxious curiosity could hardly keep himself to his chair.

"A pursuer of criminals," answered Howard, with a look at Claire which showed that he had already relieved her mind of doubt as to his character. "I have been a detective in the employ of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, engaged in ferreting out a most dangerous band of criminals."

"A detective!" broke involuntarily from more than one mouth.

"It w's the 'Chosen' then! The train-smashers! The murderers!" exclaimed Billy, springing to his feet in his excitement.

"Exactly. It was that band of desperate and mysterious criminals."

"Commonalists," said Billy, in a tone as if he was uttering some sibylline word that contained in it the total sum of villainy.

"I do not think it is quite fair to call them Communists," returned Howard. "That name includes a great many honest and true men, however misguided and extravagant they may be in their views. That this secret band availed itself of the excited feelings of the Communists, however, to aid in their own plans, I have no doubt."

"It don't seem that it was altogether rascality that allied them," broke in Jacob Baggage. "For they hung one man and shot another for robbing."

"That is true. What peculiar aim they had must always remain a mystery, for I doubt if one of them now lives. It may have been some Utopian idea of reforming society by a process of force that made no account of human life, and that took railroad monopolies as the type of all wrong-doing. Or their object may have been plunder on a large scale, with punishment of such of their members that undertook private plundering. Just what their objects were I fear we shall never know."

"And you were employed to detect them?" asked Mr. Hamilton.

"The railroad officials have known of the existence of such a mysterious band for a long time," said Howard. "But all their efforts to trace them proved in vain. Finally I was put on their track with the understanding that I was to take the most extreme measures, even to exposing myself to the utmost misrepresentation in the task of unearthing them. You all know how much I imperiled my own happiness by my faithfulness to my task."

He pressed the hand of the beautiful woman by

his side, her eyes looking down into his with an expression of the deepest trust and affection.

"I put myself in communication at once with all the disaffected," he continued, "and seemed of them all the most disaffected. Gradually I must have become known to some of the members of this band as one of a disposition and views similar to their own, for distant overtures were made to me which I went more than half-way to meet."

"I seen you—" cried Billy, "I seen you talkin' to Joe Blizzard. It was that set me to speecing you."

"Yes. He was one of my conquests," continued Howard. "I gradually extended my acquaintance among the band. But I failed to overcome a lurking distrust on their part, and to learn the nature of their schemes. This much I did learn, that there was an organizing head who used the others merely as tools. I knew that to break up the band this leader must be dislodged. But they kept his secret well. I could not learn it."

"I've got to say this much, Mr. Howard," remarked Billy, incredulously, "and I can't help sayin' it, though I have let up on you a bit. And what I mean's this. Your story don't hold water none too well. How 'bout gettin' rested, and goin' to prison, and breakin' jail, and knockin' that Harrisburg loop off the ears, hey?"

Howard laughed at Billy's distrust. He continued as follows:

"My going to prison and escaping were parts of a scheme, by which I expected to overcome the distrust and gain the confidence of these villains."

"But to be arrested as you were!" said Claire. "And to hurt me so by your strange demeanor! You forced me to doubt you."

"We have John Jordan to thank for all that," continued Howard. "The officers who were to arrest me thought it a *bona fide* business. In some way Jordan discovered that they had a warrant against me. He knew that I was in company with Miss Hamilton in the car, and took the jealous opportunity of informing them of my presence. What do I hardly knew, Claire. I could not destroy my plans at that advanced stage. I had to submit to the arrest, though it tore my heart to think in what a position I must be placed in your eyes."

"I suffered, indeed!" she feelingly replied.

"I could not resist the desire to see you," he continued. "I knew you were at Altoona, and watched for you there. But I did not dare to tell that my escape from prison was but a ruse. Even the air has ears, to catch and repeat secrets such as mine."

"You trailed the chaps into Pittsburg?" asked Billy.

"Just so. I was watching them during the whole of the riots, in hopes that some chance might reveal their leader to me. I saw that I was not alone in the task, but that our two young friends here had an object similar to my own."

"I knowed they was Communists. That's why I followed them," said Billy. "Ain't that the solid fact, Hans?"

"Dat's sound on der goose," replied Hans.

"I tracked big Hughey, as one of them was called, until he was mortally wounded. I then followed Carlton, the other, until he put himself in a position where death was sure to follow, in his effort to fire the gun at the round-house. I saw that but one course remained. By arresting him I might save his life and the secret, that would otherwise die with him. I attempted to do so; but too late. He was killed."

"See? I'm go under," cried Billy, eagerly. "You took something from Lis breast-pocket."

"I did not imagine any one detected me at that," replied Howard. "It was a secret badge of the order that enabled me to overcome the doubts of big Hughey. With his last words, as the boys here know, he revealed to me the well-concealed name of the leader of the terrible 'Chosen'."

"And that name?" asked Mr. Hamilton, rising on his arm in his earnestness.

"Was John Jordan."

A shudder passed through Claire Hamilton's frame. Her face grew, for the moment, deathly pale. She clung to Howard's arm with both her hands, as if for protection from some dreadful menace.

"And didn't I tell you what was up?" exclaimed Billy. "Bout the splicing and all that? And got the order for the ingine? And sich a gay old ride as we had, this way, all last night; and sich a fight fur it! You never seen the like. Ain't that all so, Pop and Dutchy?"

"We had a hard run," replied Jacob.

"Yaw. All der night, too. I slept one while; put we run'd on, all der same."

"Slept!" cried Billy. "Why, I thought it was another ingine snoring behind me. You'd take a j'renum fur sleepin' in a baby-show. You would, sure."

"I can never thank you too much, my dear young friend," said Claire, taking bo'h his hands in hers, and pressing them warmly. "I owe to you my escape from a horrible fate, and—"

"And I owe even more," exclaimed Howard. "I owe to you my love and all my future happiness." His effort to shake Billy's hand proved quite as much a caress of the slender form of Claire, who yielded with utter confidingness to his arm.

"And I owe you my daughter's happiness, and my life," came in feeble but earnest accents from the grateful invalid.

"And I own you!" exclaimed Lucy, springing gleefully into his arms.

"Then jist run off with me, Lucy," returned Billy, and let us have a high old time 'mong the doll babies. I'll be gettin' too big fur my boots, sure, if I stay here much longer."

Lucy, nothing loth, carried him off to her playroom, heedless of what further explanations might be needed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FINALE.

Of course all this was followed by a wedding. It would not be in the nature of things otherwise. And this story would scarcely have been commenced unless the writer could have been able to chronicle a happy ending. For it is never desirable nor nevolent to make two excellent classes of people unhappy. Viz.: the readers of a story, and the characters; the one having the right of a pleasant termination of their task, and the other of a happy escape from their troubles.

George Howard and Claire Hamilton did get married; there is no doubt of that. The wedding was so recent that all who can remember last Christmas cannot forget that festive occasion in which two loving souls were happily made one.

It was not solemnized until Mr. Hamilton was sufficiently recovered to be able to attend church, and see his daughter made happy in the inspiring presence of a multi-ude of sympathetic friends.

You may be sure that Billy Baggage and Hans Breitmann formed two of that highly interested audience. And for that matter "Pop" Baggage, in all the importance of perfect sobriety and new clothes, was present. And by his side, young again in her pride in her reformed husband, stood the much-enduring Mrs. Baggage.

But we will not name all the members of the audience, except to say that little Lucy was Billy's lady-friend for the occasion, and that she earnestly assured him, as they left the church together, that:

"It won't be many years, Billy, before I'm as old as aunt Claire. And you won't be so much older. And then we'll get married, you and me, Billy, for you told me that I might be your little wife. And won't I look nice in orange flowers, and a white veil?"

And Elly fairly blushed as Hans undertook to answer:

"Yaw. Dat will pe ever so nice. Ant I'll give you poth one l ox of gum-drops forder wedding present. Ant we'll all pe jus so happy as never was. You pet."

Not years, scarcely months have passed since this occasion, and we do not have to follow our characters far down the stream of time to see on what shore they have stranded, or in what current of weal or woe they are still drifting.

George Howard and his bride are just out of their honeymoon, and have gone to housekeeping in the most approved modern style, in a sweet little nest in Chester valley, about which the first blossoms of spring are inviting the jocund bees to their sweet harvest.

There are no indications of any continued existence of the mysterious band of "The Chosen," which, it is believed, died out in the Pittsburg riots, and in the subsequent self-murder of their leader.

And Claire assures her lover that he has no need of any further detective business, or running into danger, and that he shan't do either, if she can prevent it.

The happy fellow seems to be very willing, so far, to let her prevent it.

As for the Baggage family, they have got into better circumstances since the father has become a thoroughly sober fireman, and since Billy's salary has been raised, and Colonel Scott has promised, some day, to make a man of him.

They have left their tumble-down, up-town baggage-car, and have settled in a neat little palace-car in the West Philadelphia suburb, where even roses have been coaxed to bloom, and their clambering honeysuckle is making the most flowery promise of what it is capable of doing.

As for Hans, he is still Billy's most ardent follower, and yet makes gum-drops his ultimatum of existence, though there are some far, faint whispers that he may yet attain to the dignity of bananas, and even in some far future to reach the sublime height of fried oysters.

So far, however, he sticks to his gum-drops, in happy unconsciousness of what fate has in store for him.

Billy is a frequent visitor to the new home of the Howards. It is so near a station on the road, and he can 'most any time jump off and run over just to see if they are all well, and if Lucy has forgot him yet.

It was only last week that we met him there, as neat and natty a young hero as you would care to see, with the red of health in his cheek, and the flash of his old spirit in his ye.

And we knew at a glance that the merry, bright-faced child, that made so much of the handsome lad, was little Lucy, and that the fine-faced man, and the beautiful lady by his side, were our old friends, George and Claire Howard; for does not the boy say:

"Did you ever see anybody, Mr. Howard, like this Lucy Hamilton? I guess she must take me for one of her dolls. And she was just a-wishin', aunt Claire, that I went to school with her, and learnt how much three times six is, and what's a noun, and how to spell pumpkin, and all that sort of nonsense."

"I wish you could indeed, Billy," says Claire, with her beautiful smile. "You are a good fellow, I acknowledge, but you do murder the king's English."

"Don't you mind, aunt Claire," cried Lucy, enthusiastically. "I will teach him. I'll learn him all manner of things. And I want you to come this way with me now, Elly, and see the new kitten I've got. It's a ch beaut'."

And the last we saw of them Lucy was dragging Billy away by the coat-sleeve, and Mr. and Mrs. Howard laughing heartily at the comical look with which the boy submitted to his tiny tyrant.

THE END.